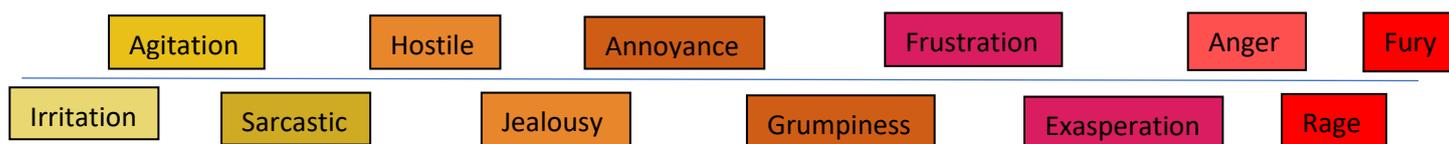# Understanding anger

Emotions, of which there are 4 base types (joy, anger, fear and sadness) are there for a reason; they help you make sense of the world. For example, anger tells us that we feel we have been wronged, fear prompts us that our safety needs are not being met, sadness may indicate that some of our needs of belonging and fulfilment are not being met and joy suggests that needs are being met and we are happy with our current situation.

All emotions are valid and useful, yet, quite often we avoid certain emotions and try to suppress them because they are viewed as being 'negative'.

The Anger Spectrum

The reason we deny anger is the word conjures up the image of extreme anger: shouting, lack of control, saying nasty things - bad, scary stuff. But anger is 1/4 of all emotions felt, so there must be more to it than that? There's a whole spectrum of emotions that come under the 'anger' heading, from the mildest irritation to full blow fury.

Agitation	Hostile	Annoyance	Frustration	Anger	Fury

Irritation	Sarcastic	Jealousy	Grumpiness	Exasperation	Rage

What causes anger?

You feel angry when there has been an injustice done, either to yourself or someone else.

It can be something trivial - someone has 15 items in their basket in a 8 items or less checkout and you're in a hurry.

It can be something damaging, like a stain on your favourite top or gossip that damages your reputation.

But when there's been an injustice done, the natural response is to feel anger.

If you don't express this anger, it'll turn inwards, causing stress:

- Emotionally: you feel angry, don't express it and either feel guilty for having bad feelings or get angry with yourself for not saying anything

- Physically: when you feel anger, it triggers the fight/flight response, and that causes a whole lot of physical changes which will cause health problems over time

The trick is to recognise when you're angry, why you're angry and learn to express it. One of the best ways to start recognizing your anger and to work out how to express it is using a **journal**. It's great because it's a SAFE place to vent: You can rant, you can be horrible, you can swear, you can **let it all out** and it's safe to do that.

It means you don't have to hold on to that anger and have conversations going around in your head about what happened and what you should have done or shouldn't have said when you're trying to sleep. Then, when you've calmed down, you can work out:

a. Why you were really angry

b. What you want to do about it

The anger iceberg

Anger typically has less to do with a specific event and more to do with what that event triggered in an individual. With anger, there are often other painful or uncomfortable emotions laying underneath the surface that are too difficult to acknowledge or express, so instead, when an event triggers our 'kettle to boil', the emotion felt is expressed as something we have learnt is an acceptable expression - anger.
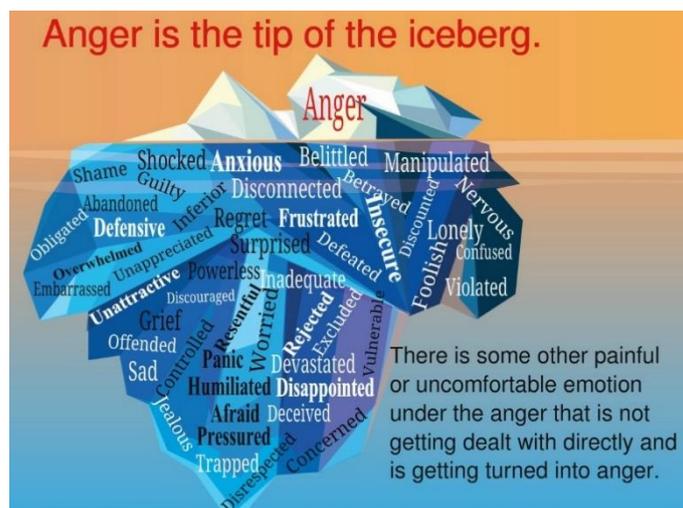
Certain negative thought patterns often precede an outburst of anger. These patterns include:

- **Blaming:** When a person claims negative events or emotions are always someone else's fault. Blaming others is often an attempt to avoid responsibility or shame.

- **Overgeneralizing:** When a person gets caught up in black and white thinking. The words "always", "should" and "never" are common in this pattern. Overgeneralizing often makes a situation seem worse than it really is.

- **Rigidity:** When a person is unable to reconcile what is happening with what they think should happen. The individual may have a low tolerance for frustration.

- **Mind-reading:** When a person convinces themselves that another person intentionally hurt or disrespected them. The person may intuit hostility where there isn't any.

- **Collecting straws:** When a person mentally tallies things to justify their anger. They let small incidents build in their head until they reach "the last straw." The person's anger then boils over in what most people see as an overreaction.

By challenging these thought patterns, most people can reduce their anger.

- Notice when you hear yourself say/think "should", "always" and "never"

- Put the thought on trial – how true is it? Is it always the case? Can you think of times where you were in that situation and it didn't happen? Have you reacted differently in the past? Etc

- Take a breath and note how your body is reacting, mind is reacting and what other feelings might be pushing the anger up – does any past events or incidences come to mind when you have felt similarly? What were they? What was going on then?

- Consider the 3 R's - typical responses to anger are **R**eact (blow up) – **R**etreat (move away) – **R**ethink (contemplate alternative responses) by which time the person may already be in trouble due to their reaction or may be now feeling guilt for their reaction. By reordering to **R**etreat (physically or in your mind) – **R**ethink and then **R**espond (a thoughtful reaction) consequences of anger can be lessened

- Consider the Rear-view mirror analogy – if your anger is due to an historical event, consider how you use a rear-view mirror? It's to check things quickly, right? What would happen if you kept focussing on what's in the mirror? (you would likely crash), you can keep glancing back in mirror but what will happen (likely crash). IF you can resolve the issue which keeps diverting your attention to look back, you can then focus on the present and future and move forward safely.

Historical questions which can help understand your relationship with anger

How was anger displayed when you grew up?

How did your parents/carers manage their anger?

Was anger something that was encouraged or suppressed?

Move on to what to do with anger now.

Differentiate between feelings (the felt sense in our body) and behaviour (what we do, physically and emotionally, with these emotions)

Validate feelings, challenge behaviour – we can't change how we feel only how we respond to it – develop a lapse in time so we are responding to feelings not reacting to them