

Those who have been affected by crime, either directly or indirectly, experience a range of emotions. One of the strongest and most commonly named emotions is anger. It is the one that many people are afraid of or uncomfortable in dealing with.

Anger is often described as a dangerous force racing out of control, threatening to overwhelm the person. It can be directed against the offender, and against family and friends whom you feel have let you down. Anger may also be directed at the police and criminal justice system, the media, God or “the Universe”, the community in general, or against anybody or anything. Your anger can also be internalised and directed toward yourself. Anger can feel like the enemy; something to be fought against, denied, suppressed or destroyed.

What then is anger? Does anger have to be the enemy? What purpose does it serve? How can a survivor of crime be in control of this emotion and use it constructively?

What is Anger?

The *emotion* of anger is often confused with violent or aggressive *behaviour*. It is good to remember that anger is simply an emotion – just as sadness, fear, peacefulness and happiness are emotions. Anger does not have to lead to aggressive behaviour.

Anger is usually the sign that we feel violated or harmed in some way. It is a clue to alert us to other related feelings such as helplessness, rejection, fear, hurt, humiliation, betrayal, disappointment, shame, frustration, grief and pain.

For those who have been affected by crime, anger is often part of a grief response, a protest against what has happened, an emotional attempt to ‘undo’ what has been done.

The Physical Energy of Anger

The emotion of anger often feels like a strong physical presence. Some physical clues to its presence include a faster heart beat, facial nerves moving, tightness in the stomach, “prickly skin” and a rush of adrenalin through the body. If the anger is intense it sometimes feels as though it can’t be contained and may show itself in either verbally or physically aggressive ways. Anger does not have to be expressed in aggressive ways.

When can anger be difficult to manage?

Anger is difficult when it:

- is too intense
- continues for a long time with no resolution
- is expressed through aggression
- disrupts relationships, social life or work
- is not expressed (pretending it’s not there or trying to push it down doesn’t work!)
- is used to blame and harm others

This fact sheet has been developed to provide general information to victims of crime. It is not intended as a replacement for medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you have particular concerns please contact your general practitioner, counsellor or Victim Support Service.

Ideas for Managing Anger

Managing anger involves both the release of the physical energy of the emotion as well as addressing the issues which have triggered it.

The following are practical steps for noticing and managing the energy of anger:

- Know what your body is doing with the emotion; what are the signs that the anger is reaching “flashpoint” and you are starting to feel “out of control”.
- Choose a safe way of releasing the anger before that “flashpoint” is reached; this may include taking yourself out of the situation that is pushing your emotional buttons.
- Where possible, let family and friends know that you are working on the anger and ask them to support you.
- It may be helpful to agree on a plan of action with family and friends to deal with anger before it gets out of control. For example, you may decide to use a ‘time out’ sign which will let your family or friends know that you think you may be about to lose control. You can then leave the room to avoid taking the anger out on them; in this way they will not feel blamed but will understand that you are taking responsibility for your own behaviour.
- Physical exercise can help reduce the excess adrenalin in your body which strong emotions, like anger, can produce.
- Other physical outlets can be useful too – anything which does not hurt either yourself or others (e.g. punching pillows, ripping up an old telephone book, stomping on old egg cartons, throwing rocks into a river, screaming and yelling in private).

The following are some practical steps to help with thinking about anger:

- Acknowledge that anger exists – don’t call it by any other name (e.g. “I’m upset” or “I feel down”).
“I feel angry”
- Identify the target of the anger you feel (this might seem obvious but sometimes when you dig a little deeper you might find unexpected targets for anger, including yourself).
“I feel angry towards...”
- Try to be specific in stating what the anger you feel is all about.
“I feel angry because...”
- Try to identify the underlying reasons for the anger response – what “rules” or values have been violated or broken?
“I feel angry because... because...”
- Take responsibility for your emotions and reactions. You cannot control other peoples’ thoughts, emotions, and behaviours but you *can* control your own choices of behaviours in any given situation.
“I choose to feel angry because...”
- Make a commitment to keep angry feelings under your own control.
“I will not allow anger to get out of control; I will be in charge of the anger rather than let it control me. I will not allow anger to push me to say or do things which I might later regret.”
- Try to find ways of changing the things that have brought on the angry feelings. You may not be able to undo the past but you may be able to influence community attitudes or social factors which might have contributed to the crime, or influence changes in the system which deals with the crime
- Use whatever supports you need to give voice to the anger; speaking with a counsellor may be helpful rather than ‘going it alone’ or taking it out on your family and friends.

Resource Centre Materials

You are welcome to borrow books from our Resource Centre which might help you to better understand and deal with anger. Please enquire at the reception desk about free membership of our Borrowers' Club.

Acknowledgements

This fact sheet has drawn on material supplied by COPE, and from a chapter called Releasing Your Anger in *The Right to Innocence: Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Beverley Engel, Ivy Bosks, New York, 1989).

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at www.victimsa.org