



## COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

### How to Deal with Angry People

*“Speak when you are angry and you will give the best speech you will ever regret.”*

*~Ambrose Bierce*

*“Anger is the wind which blows out the lamp of the mind.” ~ Robert Green Ingersoll*

What makes us angry? Generally speaking, we get angry when there is a triggering event. This event could be an email we receive, the way someone just looked at us, or even a thought in our own mind. Regardless of the stimulus, whether we get angry or not depends on how often we get angry on a daily basis, and our personality traits. If we get angry often, our body becomes addicted to the chemicals released when we feel upset. We therefore become conditioned to react to the triggering event with anger because that is what the cells of our body crave. Some researchers call this phenomenon the “pre-anger state.”<sup>1</sup> The pre-anger state can also make us more susceptible to becoming angry if we’re tired, anxious, or already angry (and thus “trigger happy” for anger).

The personality traits that predict consistent angry reactions to triggering events include: narcissism, competitiveness, low-frustration tolerance, poor affect regulation, predatory aggression, sadism, and sociopathy/psychopathy. Ironically, the common themes for these personality traits include fear, neuroticism, and low self-esteem. Basically, individuals with anger management issues cannot handle the world around them. They expect both the people and the environments around them to cater to *THEIR* needs, rather than relating to the environment in a collaborative way. As Ashley’s character in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* said, “Life is under no obligation to give us what we expect.” People with anger management issues do not understand that; instead, they believe the places and the people they are around need to “be” a certain way, or they get upset. Compare the situation to a dog on the beach barking furiously at the waves as the tide comes in and out. The ocean is doing something the dog is not happy about, and he/she is letting the ocean know. The problem, which those of us observing the dog know, is that the waves are not going to stop, and the dog’s anger and behavior are efforts in futility.

That bully on the “playground” (in your office, on the other side of the courtroom, or at home) is actually a person with a very sad, weak character; ironically, they abuse the people around them in order to feel seen and heard, because they don’t have the self-esteem

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Martin, *Why We Get Mad*, (Oct 2011) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/all-the-rage/201110/why-we-get-mad>.

to love or accept themselves. Most people with anger management issues have a need to be right; they have to “win” the argument, have the last word, or get in the last dig. Generally, people who get angry are very concrete thinkers; they see black or white, right or wrong, with no room for in-between. Because of their low self-esteem, they have to believe that everything they do or say is “right,” and everything the rest of the world does is “wrong,” and they can twist any argument to support that. This is an occupational hazard for those of us in the legal profession, because the need to win is a reality in an adversarial process.

When we examine what underscores the “angry personality,” it’s easy to develop compassion for those who get belligerent and angry about the world. First, they create tremendous pain for themselves that they cannot handle, which is why, unfortunately, they try to spread it around. These are individuals who never learned how to self-soothe, which is a crucial stage in child development. They also have a lot in common with children throwing temper tantrums because they have not yet learned how to express themselves maturely. Usually they were raised in some kind of abusive (emotionally, psychologically, or physically) environment: their parents were angry often or had mental health or substance abuse problems; they were ostracized or felt like they “didn’t fit in” at school; they never felt they were good enough in comparison to others; their parents or families only paid attention to them when they were bossy or angry. However, when we are abused by people with anger management issues (which generally just means being in proximity to them), our compassion may not be enough to prevent our sense of well-being and physical health from being compromised.

Stanford professor and neuroendocrinologist Dr. Robert Sapolsky has spent almost four decades studying the physiological effects of stress on health; his results show that long-term stress suppresses the immune, digestive, and reproductive systems.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we get sick (weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, common colds, chronic fatigue, etc.), depressed, anxious, malnourished (even if we eat well) and lose our sex drive or have difficulties with fertility. The reason is very simple; our stress response is telling our bodies that we are in danger. Our immune, digestive, and reproductive systems are not necessary to help us survive if we have a gun to our head or are being chased by a lion. The problem, however, is that when we are around people with anger management issues, our bodies believe we are being physically threatened by a predator. According to Sapolsky’s research, those who are of a lower rank and/or that socially isolate have the highest incidence of stress related illnesses. In addition, his research shows that in environments where primates are not

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Sapolsky, *Peace Among Primates: It’s Our Nature*, (March 27, 2013)  
<http://www.beinghuman.org/article/peace-among-primates>.

in daily physical danger from predators, they create psychological stressors; they essentially take out the stress on each other in accord with the hierarchy. When those close to the top of the hierarchy are having a bad day (when they are angry, fearful, confused, or feel threatened about something), they take it out on those who are subordinate to them. Basically, those with anger management issues who are at the “top” of the hierarchy make everyone around them physically sick, and mentally anxious and depressed.

A longitudinal research project of close to 50 years called the Whitehall Study<sup>3</sup> has traced the same phenomena exclusively in humans in their work environment. The results mirror Dr. Sapolsky’s findings: those who have lower rank in the workplace suffer from much higher stress related illnesses and diseases than those who are higher in the organizational hierarchy. Because those in lower ranks in the workplace are generally in positions without any power or control over decisions, the perception is that the higher-ups, or bosses, have the power and control over the lives of the subordinates. Are you micromanaged by someone in your life? Does he or she get angry often? When someone with anger management issues gets upset, they are trying to scare those around them into submission and are trying to scare the subordinates into changing something so they can feel better. Essentially, they are trying to bully the world around them into changing.

Ironically, we could never stand on our heads in enough ways to make that person happy. Bullies and people with anger management problems have low self-esteem, and nothing in the external world can fill that void. The individual will try, however, to distract themselves from feeling their own self-loathing by seeking something or someone external to criticize, try to fix, yell at, push around, or point out the fault in. That is also why they have to win every argument. If they are “wrong,” their unconscious mind believes that they are worthless.

People with anger management problems can be scary and unstable. If someone who has some control over your life (partners, bosses, spouses, clients, landlords), and they have problems controlling their temper, it is easy to feel like you are between a rock and a hard place when it comes to dealing with them. So, what’s the solution? Here are some ideas you might try:

1. **Deal with your own anger management issues:** Oftentimes, we get angry (sometimes masked as depression, victim mentality, heart burn, fatigue, frequent colds, etc.) about the boundary violations that happen when someone is belligerent, hostile, and angry toward us or around us. Fighting fire with fire does NOT work. We can get aggressive or passive aggressive in retaliation, and it will

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<sup>3</sup> Erin Wigger, *The Whitehall Study*, (June 22, 2011) <http://unhealthywork.org/classic-studies/the-whitehall-study/>.

only fuel more of the individual's predatory response toward us. Instead, work on your own anger response: breathe deep; take a mental step back; wait a day before sending the email or returning the call; leave the room (go to the restroom or get some coffee or tea); go to therapy. Do whatever it takes to manage your own anger.

2. **Do not engage with the material:** When angry people get upset, it is not actually about what they think it is about. People who are addicted to anger just want to get angry; the fact that the dishes weren't cleaned the 'right' way, you didn't read their mind about something they 'expected' you to do, they got an email, or a person cut in front of them in traffic is not what is making them angry. There is a reason why angry people also tend to be micromanagers; they are **LOOKING** for something to get upset about, even if it is a completely irrational or illogical thing to get upset about. Therefore, if the angry person directs their anger at you, do not engage with what they are talking about right away. Don't try to pacify them by giving them an answer right away about the "issue." Instead, change the subject, ask them how they are feeling, ask them how their weekend was, or make a joke. However it would work for you, direct their attention away from the "issue" for long enough to get them more emotionally grounded and consciously aware of themselves. If you engage them in the material they are upset about immediately, they will continue to spiral out of control because they want you to fight back with them just so they can justify their anger more.
3. **Take control over your life:** Even though the concept of control is ultimately illusory, we still need to feel a sense of control over our own lives in general. Experiencing even the perception of control or "having a say" in a situation can drastically reduce our stress levels. In our place of employment, if we can advocate for ourselves and have discussions with the "higher ups," or with the human resource department, we should do so. When it comes to dealing with demanding or difficult clients, setting boundaries at the beginning of the attorney-client relationship can help prevent conflicts down the road. It is important to express what works for us and what doesn't; however, sometimes we are in situations where the environment might be too threatening or unstable to have such mature discussions.
4. **Build your resources:** Cultivate relationships and social groups (outside of the environment where the person is) that foster a sense of belonging and positivity. The resiliency to cope with the stress comes from using our social nervous system,

the system that is activated when we are around others for whom we feel appreciation and love. This system produces the chemicals that neutralize and heal the damage created by stress. Positive interpersonal relationships (with friends, family, members of a weekend sports league, colleagues, romantic partners, etc.) cultivate a sense of safety that is missing in stressful work environments; they allow us to feel like we can be ourselves without the fear of doing “something wrong.”

5. **Acknowledge that you can leave:** While it might not feel like it, and you might have a million arguments (of course you do, you’re a lawyer) about why you cannot get away from this person, the perception of being trapped is just that: a perception. Unless you are in prison, you are not *literally, physically trapped*. You do have choices. Go through your options; make a pro and con list of what you could/can do (don’t think of the restrictions; write all options down, no matter how unrealistic they might seem). Maybe that list includes talking to someone in Human Resources, looking for a new job, or quitting your job; maybe it includes going to couples counseling or filing for a divorce. It’s important to acknowledge your options. It doesn’t mean you have to act on any of them. Allowing yourself to consider your options rather than focusing on how “stuck” you are will allow you to recognize your power rather than feeling powerless. People with anger management issues want you to believe that you are powerless. But, of course, they are the ones who are powerless because they cannot control themselves. Their unstable, out of control attitude and their low self-esteem does not have to make you feel powerless as well.

Trying to cope with the anger of those around us is not easy, and it can eventually make us physically ill and emotionally worn out. If you need help dealing with someone in your life who is frequently angry, or you would like some more tips on how to manage your own anger, let us know. We are confidential and have a lot of experience getting judges, lawyers, and law students the resources to process what is a very common experience in the legal profession; anger management.

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