

Anger:

How to Turn Down the Heat & Reclaim your Professional Cool

Carrie Bowers, CAS

Attorneys are well versed in experiencing and witnessing anger, whether it is their own or that of clients, colleagues, or opposing counsel. It can even stem from feelings of discontent at home. Anger is a powerful emotion that is contagious, and the internal neurochemicals and hormones produced when we become upset are addictive. Litigators in particular are exposed to frustration, irritation, and anger on a regular basis, and it can be hard to maintain composure in an intensely adversarial environment. There is good reason for this: anger triggers our "flight or fight" response and releases a deluge of chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol in our brains. The rush of adrenaline can feel powerful, and expressions of pent-up feelings can produce relief. In turn, these feelings trip the release of dopamine, the feel-good chemical that drives our brains' pleasure/reward cycle.

Once this cycle starts, the brain may connect feelings of anger with feelings of pleasure. This connection makes it easier to become angry the next time we experience a frustrating situation.¹ While anger may feel good in the moment, most of us quickly experience embarrassment, regret, or even shame thereafter. This is especially true if an outburst happens in front of colleagues, staff, or family members. No one wants to snap at their spouse or children the week before opening arguments or be reprimanded by a judge for a snarky remark lobbed at opposing counsel. Moreover, because attorneys must maintain a heightened level of conduct, anger can also harm your professional reputation and - even more importantly - your client's interests.

A calm demeanor is a fundamental aspect of professionalism. Attorneys are avatars for their clients and representatives of our legal system. Professional composure can help maintain a respectful and orderly atmosphere in the courtroom by setting a positive example of behavior for the parties, witnesses, and opposing counsel. Remaining calm can also enhance an attorney's persuasiveness by presenting clear and confident arguments and positions. Those witnessing an angry outburst may be triggered emotionally by it, leading to an emotional frame of mind, which could influence how they view and respond to you as an attorney - which can ultimately affect your client. A collected demeanor can help attorneys project authority, communicate complex ideas effectively, and establish a connection with the jury. Likewise, a composed attorney can think more clearly and make better decisions during a trial. Staying calm enables them to analyze and respond to unexpected developments, adapt their arguments, and make appropriate objections, all of which help promote their client's best interests. So how can attorneys keep their cool during trying times? The first step is to understand the physiological process of anger. The second step is knowing how to turn down the heat by allowing the rational part of your mind to supersede the emotional center of your brain.

Step 1: Recognizing & Responding to Anger

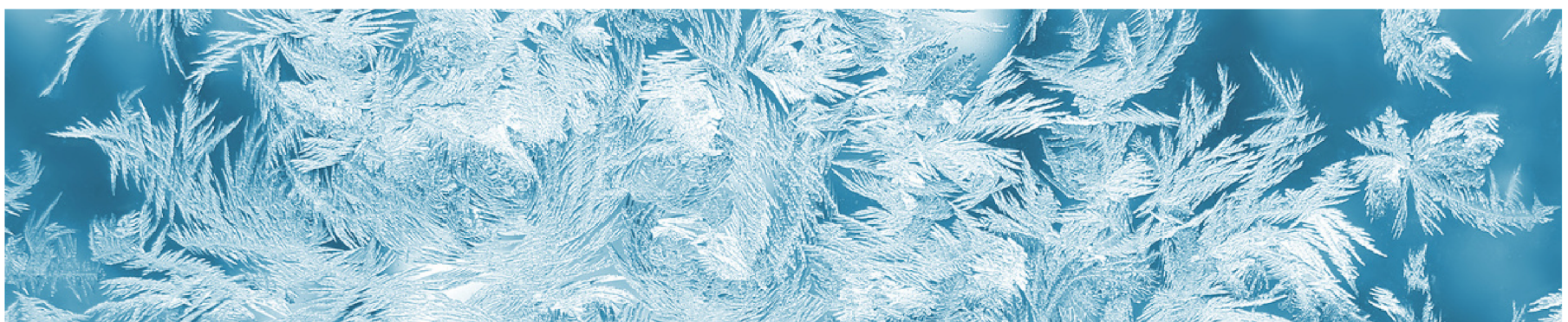
The physical manifestations of anger, such as muscle tension, increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and accelerated breathing, are all part of the body's preparation for action. The amygdala, located in the brain's center, instantly detects threats and triggers our fight-or-flight response, initiating a response before our logic can assess the situation. This allows us to react quickly to potential dangers, but it can also lead to impulsive and irrational behavior if not regulated by the prefrontal cortex. Located in the forebrain, the prefrontal cortex regulates and helps control our emotions. It allows us to evaluate a situation, consider the consequences of our actions, and make reasoned judgments. Engaging this part of the brain can control our emotional responses and prevent impulsive reactions.²



Step 2: Strategies for Regulating Anger

Here are two basic ways to accomplish self-regulation when needed:

- Relaxation techniques can reduce arousal and calm the body's response to anger. Deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness techniques can help regulate physiological symptoms such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension.³ One basic example is "square breathing": Inhale for four seconds, hold your breath in for four seconds, release the air smoothly for four seconds, and then wait four seconds to draw your next breath. Repeat a few times until you feel the tension leaving your body. You can subtly engage in this breath regulation exercise, even seated at the counsel table.
- Cognitive control techniques involve challenging and reframing negative thoughts associated with anger. Instead of viewing a client or opposing counsel with anger, try viewing them with compassion. Your client relies on you as their representative. They likely do not have the benefit of a legal education nor are they familiar with the intricacies of the court. They may be masking their fear and overwhelm with their own displays of anger. Remember that opposing counsel is also their client's avatar and is under as much stress as you are. Likewise, it is helpful to pull back and see the greater picture, that you and opposing counsel are elements of the legal process and that a zealous representation of a client is not generally a personal attack. By changing the narrative, we can actively strengthen the influence of the prefrontal cortex over the amygdala, helping us respond to anger in a more measured and controlled manner.



It is important to remember that managing anger is a learned skill. With awareness, self-reflection, and practice, individuals can develop healthier ways of dealing with anger and prevent it from escalating into unhelpful, unprofessional, or even harmful behavior. If you feel caught up in a cycle of anger or are anticipating a stressful period and want to manage the associated stressors pro-actively, please reach out to your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program for a confidential wellbeing consultation and/or additional resources.



Carrie Bowers is the Program Coordinator for the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential, and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.

Notes

1. Chester, D. K., DeWall, C. N., Derefinko, K. J., Estus, S., Lynam, D. R., Peters, J. R., & Jiang, Y. (2015). Looking for reward in all the wrong places: dopamine receptor gene polymorphisms indirectly affect aggression through sensation-seeking. *Social Neuroscience*, 11(5), 487–494. [Oettingen, Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation \(Current 2014\).](#)
2. Garfinkel, S. N., Zorab, E., Navaratnam, N., Engels, M., Mallorquí-Bagué, N., Minati, L., Dowell, N. G., Brosschot, J. F., Thayer, J. F., & Critchley, H. D. (2015). Anger in brain and body: the neural and physiological perturbation of decision-making by emotion. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 11(1), 150–158. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsv099>
3. Wright, S. J., Day, A., & Howells, K. (2009). Mindfulness and the treatment of anger problems. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 14(5), 396–401. [Tobin and Dunkley, "Self-critical perfectionism and lower mindfulness and self-compassion predict anxious and depressive symptoms over two years," Behav. Res. and Therapy 136 \(Jan. 2021\).](#)

