

**'Anger is the first emotion human beings experience  
and the last we learn to manage'**

– Colleen Kelley –

### ■ Introduction

Anger is one of the first emotions we experience as very small babies. It is a natural emotion borne out of frustration and is a positive and constructive aid to survival. Its function is to provide us with a vital boost of physical and emotional energy just when we need it most. Anger can become a problem when it occurs too frequently, is too intense, lasts too long, when it leads to aggression, or when it disrupts our relationships. It has been said that anger wrecks more relationships than any other emotion. When our anger is creating problems for us either at work or at home we need to learn ways of controlling it.

Anger can be defined as an emotional state induced by an impulse to attack, defend or protect as a *response to a perceived threat or challenge*. That perceived threat or fear can be triggered by an insult, verbal abuse, physical assault, frustration, injustice, unfairness, criticism or annoyance. Anger is often the emotional reaction to very basic, childlike feelings of loss, hurt, abandonment or failing to get a basic need met.

When we get angry a subtle chain of observable events occurs. We may think that we just 'snap', but that is not the case. That chain includes

- a** an external trigger when something happens,
- b** our interpretation of that trigger which is the thought or mental statement we make to ourselves,
- c** our increased level of physical arousal (muscles tense, heartbeat increased, breathing becoming more rapid).

Often this chain of events occurs so quickly and automatically we are not aware of what has gone on. Anger management is about recognising, breaking down and altering this sequence of events.

### ■ Principles of anger management

- 1** Aggression is a learnt behaviour which can be changed. Although we are all born with a potential to be aggressive we learn ways of channelling that impulse and behaving.
- 2** Our core beliefs and our thoughts affect the way we behave. For example if we believed that 'life should always be fair', we would be continuously disappointed, frustrated and angry. The more 'shoulds', 'oughts' and high expectations we hold, the greater the tendency to get angry.
- 3** If we can become more aware of and understand our thinking patterns and beliefs, and alter them, we can reduce our tendency to become angry.
- 4** Anger has a physiological component. If we can become more aware of increasing levels of arousal such as increased heart rate and muscle tension we can use coping strategies to reduce this arousal, eg, relaxation.
- 5** Identification of the triggers that make us feel angry helps us to anticipate and cope better as they arise.
- 6** Loss of control is usually a result of a build up of small irritants that have not been dealt with. These may be external factors, such as financial worries, internal factors such as high expectations for ourselves, and interpersonal difficulties, such as relationship problems. Sometimes a final trigger, or 'last straw', can be something relatively minor.
- 7** Anger is fuelled by an unbalanced, stressful, unhealthy lifestyle that does not have enough pleasures. We are more likely to get angry if we are already 'wound up'.
- 8** Anger is often the result of poor problem solving, a limited repertoire of responses or difficulty in thinking of other ways of dealing with the situation.
- 9** Anger can be a positive and empowering emotion if used constructively.