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APPROPRIATE VERSUS INAPPROPRIATE ANGER

Sometimes it is appropriate to feel angry and an occasional burst of anger is not usually a problem. For instance, it may be reasonable to feel angry when we discover that a fellow employee is getting more money for doing the same job, or when someone has unfairly accused us of something we didn't do, or when we discover that someone has lied to us. However, the frequency, intensity and duration of our anger, as well as the associated behaviours may be unreasonable.

Nicky's husband, Bill, criticised her in front of their dinner guests, so it was reasonable for Nicky to feel angry. It was also appropriate for her to talk to Bill about his behaviour after the guests had gone, and to explain why it had upset her. However, if Nicky gets so mad that she hurls abuse, smashes the crockery and sends the dinner guests packing, her anger is inappropriate and unhealthy. Apart from upsetting herself, regular bursts of anger are likely to damage Nicky's relationships and reduce the number of friends who are willing to risk dinner invitations.

THE FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE

Think back to a time where you were involved in a hostile confrontation with another person. If you were tuned into what was happening inside your body, you may have noticed that your heart was beating harder and faster than usual, your face had become flushed and you were feeling hot. You may also have noticed that your breathing was faster than normal and that your muscles had tensed up. These and other changes are part of a primitive biological response to perceived threat. It is called the **fight-or-flight response** because for our stone-age ancestors confronting dangerous situations (usually a predator or an enemy), it provided the extra reserves of energy needed to either fight or run away.

During the fight-or-flight response, a number of physical changes mobilise reserves of energy, enabling them to be rapidly available. In

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response to the perception of threat, our brain sends an electrical impulse to the adrenal glands (at the top of our kidneys), which release the hormone adrenaline. This causes a number of changes, including:

- nostrils and air passages in the lungs expanding to enable us to take in more air quickly.
- breathing becoming more rapid, enabling more oxygen to enter the bloodstream.
- heart beating harder and faster and our blood pressure rising. This enables the oxygen that has entered the bloodstream via the lungs to be rapidly delivered to the muscles where it is needed for energy.
- liver releasing glucose to provide an additional quick source of fuel.
- digestion and other bodily processes that are not immediately essential slowing down or stopping.
- blood being diverted to the muscles, which tense up in preparation for action (fight or fleeing).
- our mind becoming focused on the source of threat, and other information being ignored.

Together these changes optimise our chances of survival during times of danger. Although we still respond in the same way as did our stone-age ancestors, in most situations today the extra reserves of energy created by the fight-or-flight response are not necessary, as we are not confronting real physical danger. In fact, the effects are often counterproductive because they create unpleasant physical symptoms and impair our ability to think clearly and function well.

BENEFITS OF ANGER

Although there are many disadvantages associated with getting angry, sometimes anger has benefits.

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ENERGY AND MOTIVATION

The high level of arousal generated by the fight-or-flight response can give us the courage to confront someone or do something positive to solve a problem. For instance, anger might spur you to confront an inconsiderate neighbour; challenge someone who has spread a nasty rumour; talk to your partner about an unresolved issue; write a letter to the editor about some injustice; arrange to talk to your Member of Parliament; donate money to a just cause or complain to the manager about poor service. Anger can be a particularly useful motivator for people who are not normally assertive. Spurring us to action can help us to solve a problem and therefore get our needs met.

POWER

Getting angry can also give us power, as once we get mad we can be scary to others. Most people hate being on the receiving end of someone else's wrath and will go out of their way to avoid it. This means that we can sometimes intimidate people into giving us what we want. In hospitals, restaurants, hotels, department stores and airports, angry, demanding people frequently get more immediate attention and better service than those who are passive and patient. In families and in workplaces, people who are prone to anger often have others walking on eggshells, doing what they can to avoid conflict. While this might make them feel powerful, there are of course lots of disadvantages in using anger this way.

DISADVANTAGES OF ANGER

A short occasional period of anger is not usually a problem, as long as it is proportionate to the situation, and does not result in aggressive, unreasonable behaviour. On the other hand, frequent, intense or prolonged anger can have detrimental effects on many aspects of our lives, including our ability to stay focused on current tasks, have good relationships, feel relaxed and happy and achieve the things that we want. Anger affects our thoughts, body and behaviours.

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THOUGHTS

Anger interferes with our ability to think clearly and rationally. It steals our attention away from the things that matter, and directs it towards perceived violations, injustices and people's misdemeanours. Anger is sustained and escalated through **rumination**—a reprocessing of thoughts about what might or should have been, playing themselves out over and over again; for example: 'And then he said ... and I said ... and he said ... I should have told him ... How dare he! ... I should have said ...' These ruminations sustain or intensify our anger, leading to more angry thoughts and even more anger. The vicious cycle can keep us stuck in futile cogitations that keep us distracted and aroused for long periods of time.

BODY

Anger produces physical arousal. If we are experiencing only a brief episode of anger, our body state returns to normal in a short period of time. However, frequent or persistent anger keeps us in a chronic state of tension and arousal, which puts additional stress on the adrenal glands and other body systems. These changes can cause sustained elevation in blood pressure, resulting in increased risk of hypertension and, according to some studies, cardiovascular disease.

BEHAVIOURS

Anger spurs people to behave aggressively. We may argue, attack, abuse, hit, blame or withdraw. Unless we are in a situation that involves genuine physical danger (in which case being prepared to attack could be useful), this type of behaviour is usually unhelpful, and creates more problems than it solves. Anger may also provoke impulsive behaviours and cause us to exercise poor judgement. In some cases it can lead to violence, destruction of property and abuse of alcohol or drugs.

While an occasional episode of anger may enable us to intimidate others, it is rarely a good way of getting our needs met. As aggressive behaviour alienates people, we lose goodwill in the longer term. At best, angry outbursts make people wary of us; at worst, they create enemies.

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Angry responses create tensions within our existing relationships and may hurt the very people we care about. Sometimes we say or do things we will later regret. Within families, the power imbalance created by frequent angry outbursts often leads to alienation, poor communication and breakdown of relationships. Individuals who are easily moved to anger are often lonely—people don't want the stress, so they keep away.

Some people express their anger through passive aggression. Their aim is to punish or hurt the other person through subtle strategies such as silence or withdrawal. They may choose to ignore the other person, physically distance themselves or respond to attempts at conversation with monosyllabic answers. While passive-aggressive behaviour can indeed make life unpleasant for the other person, it is counterproductive in the longer term. If our aim is to have healthy relationships, passive aggression is not the way to achieve that.

Finally, anger limits opportunities for negotiation and problem solving. Angry exchanges put people on the defensive and create a tense, uneasy atmosphere that is not conducive to good communication. As our focus turns to threat, we lose sight of the argument. We are far more likely to resolve disagreements and maintain healthy relationships when our anger is kept under control. It also makes it easier to communicate assertively rather than aggressively, and therefore get our needs met more often (see Chapter 10).

ACUTE VERSUS LONG-TERM ANGER

People experience different types of anger. Some are prone to acute anger—short and sharp angry explosions. They may fly into a rage in seconds, but the storm passes quickly and within 20 minutes most of their anger has dissipated. While these angry outbursts are brief, they can do a lot of damage. During episodes of acute anger, drivers commit road rage; supervisors alienate their staff; spouses abuse their partners; parents hit their children and friendships are destroyed. On the other hand, some people are prone to long-term anger or **resentment**. Here, anger is a constant presence for weeks, months or years, distracting attention, draining energy and impairing one's ability to focus, feel good and be happy.

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THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Stress in other areas of our lives can shorten our fuse and make us more prone to angry outbursts. Physical tension and arousal put us into a state of 'preparedness' where our body is ready for action, so that even a minor annoyance can trigger a major response. For instance, if you are under a lot of pressure at work, you are more likely to get mad over minor annoyances that would not normally upset you. People in long-term stressful situations (e.g. unemployment, financial hardship or turbulent relationships) are more likely to experience angry outbursts, as their constant state of preparedness makes them 'ready to fire' in response to minor provocations. Even aspects of the surrounding environment such as noise, overcrowding or heat can increase the likelihood of angry reactions.

THE VULNERABILITY FACTOR

Anger is associated with perceived threat. Although on a conscious level we are fuming at some perceived injustice, our anger also helps to override feelings of fear, hurt or vulnerability. By becoming angry, we override emotions that make us feel vulnerable with those that make us feel strong.

Tony felt threatened when his girlfriend told him that their relationship was over, and asked him to move out of their apartment. He responded with an angry, abusive tirade against her. Tony's anger displaced his initial feelings of hurt and rejection.

*

Bert felt intense anger towards his wife's medical specialist after he informed the couple that her cancer had spread. Bert's anger helped to displace the fear that gripped him as he contemplated a new, frightening reality.

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Sophie feels hurt and rejected by a work colleague who has shown no interest in her, in spite of her regular attempts to flirt with him. Her initial feelings of hurt subsequently transformed to anger. This helped to override the pain of rejection, and made her feel less vulnerable.

EXERCISE 5.1

- 1 Think of a situation in which you have felt very angry.
- 2 What aspects of the situation did you consider to be bad or unfair?
- 3 Can you identify any fear, hurt or vulnerability that contributed to your anger?

DISPLACED ANGER

Sometimes we may find ourselves venting our spleen at some poor innocent person. Displaced anger happens when we have no one to blame or when we are unable to express our anger at the appropriate person. For instance, Fred cannot vent his anger at his demanding boss, so he shouts abuse at other drivers on his way home, snaps at his wife, yells at his children and kicks the dog. A child who feels angry and helpless about the domestic violence at home may pick fights with weaker students at school or abuse his teachers. Bert felt angry with his wife's medical specialist—even though he knew he was not to blame for his wife's cancer—because there was just no one else to blame. Displaced anger is irrational and unfair because we direct it at people who are not responsible for our pain.

THE ANGER-PRONE PERSONALITY

Some people have a personality style that makes them prone to anger. This may be due to various factors—biological, psychological and developmental. In some cases, the disposition towards anger is the result of a rigid cognitive style and a low tolerance for frustration. This style of thinking makes the individual prone to getting upset whenever things go wrong (see page 74). For example, some people are prone to angry outbursts because

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they perceive others as untrustworthy, and so they frequently misinterpret people's behaviours as offensive and personal.¹

Highly stressful or traumatic events in early life can also influence the way we perceive the world, including how we interpret other people's motives. For example, a woman who was sexually abused as a child may perceive people as exploitative and untrustworthy. A man who was often verbally abused by his domineering father may feel hostility towards people in positions of authority.

People who have a self-focused personality style are also often prone to anger. Their inability to see life events from the perspective of others causes them to perceive injustice in situations where they don't get their needs met. Empathy—the ability to see things from the perspective of others—helps to curtail anger.

A predisposition towards anger and aggression can be also biologically determined. For instance, some people have an irritable temperament as part of their biological make-up, which makes them prone to arousal and angry outbursts. In some cases, people with abnormally high levels of particular hormones (prolactin in women, testosterone in men) show high levels of hostility and aggression.

Faulty regulation of neurotransmitters—the chemical messengers in the brain (in particular, serotonin and dopamine)—can also increase one's disposition to anger and aggression. The expression of these chemicals is influenced by genes, and it is sometimes the combination of genetic disposition plus negative early life experiences, that switch on the lifelong disposition to anger. Experiences of emotional or physical abuse, trauma, chaos or ongoing stress and uncertainty in childhood can influence gene expression (a process described in the new scientific field of **epigenetics**) and sensitise the nervous system to become permanently over-reactive. This makes the individual prone to vigilance and frequent physical arousal, so that even minor events provoke rapid threat responses. For this reason, they may flare up in response to small provocations, or what may seem like no reason at all.

Individuals with high susceptibility to anger usually need to work hard to keep their anger in check, or face the unpalatable consequences—interpersonal conflicts, loneliness, frequent emotional distress and, possibly,

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health problems. Understanding anger, learning management skills and practising them on a regular basis can help to reduce the frequency and intensity of angry outbursts.

TOO LITTLE ANGER

Some people rarely express anger. This may reflect a flexible cognitive style or, alternatively, the suppression of anger. When we suppress anger we put on a brave face, while below the surface we are seething with resentment. Suppressed anger often leads to passive-aggressive behaviours—we make subtle carping, negative comments or try to undermine the person, while pretending not to be angry. People suppress anger because they don't feel empowered or don't know how to express it appropriately, or because they believe that it is wrong to feel that way. The problem with suppressed anger is that we continue to hurt inside, and create barriers from others.

In contrast, some people very rarely feel angry; they require a very high level of provocation to experience any anger. While this makes them easy to live with, there can be a downside. As anger motivates us to confront or stand up for ourselves, people who rarely experience anger may behave unassertively much of the time. If we have no expectations of a fair deal from others, we may be willing to endure poor treatment without protest. I have occasionally seen people who tolerate abusive or unreasonable behaviours (often from a spouse or family member) without complaint. The absence of anger, perhaps stemming from a lack of sense of entitlement or fear of conflict, means that they are not motivated to stand up for themselves or set boundaries for acceptable behaviour. In cases like these, some anger would be healthy and useful.

HOLD IT IN OR LET IT OUT?

There is a commonly held theory that it is better to let your anger out than to hold it in. The theory presupposes that an explosive response—yelling and screaming for instance—is a healthy way of releasing anger. Some of the psychotherapies popularised in earlier times (e.g. Janov's 'Primal



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'Scream' therapy) were designed to encourage people to release their anger through screaming. Even today, some therapists encourage angry clients to 'let it out rather than hold it in'.

It is true that physical activity can provide a good outlet for releasing pent-up anger or frustration. Hitting a punching bag, digging in the garden, going for a run or doing any form of physical exercise can provide short-term relief. If you are experiencing just a brief episode of anger, that may be all you need.

While exercise can help us to let off steam, shouting at somebody is rarely helpful. Shouting often provokes others to shout back, which usually escalates tension. Many people report feeling angrier after a fiery exchange, because aggression causes anger to grow. Shouting is also often hurtful to the people we care about, and this can leave us feeling guilty and remorseful afterwards.

Some people seem to think that if they shout loud enough, then other people will do what they want ... This might produce compliance, but it does not produce real cooperation or problem-solving ... Dealing effectively with difficult situations requires composure.

RAYMOND W NOVACO, 'WHAT REALLY WORKS FOR ANGER MANAGEMENT',
SELFHELPMAGAZINE.COM.

EXERCISE 5.2

- 1 Think of a time when you shouted at someone because you felt angry.
- 2 Did shouting make you feel better or worse? Did you feel guilty or regretful later?
- 3 How did shouting affect your relationship with the other person? Would it have been better to have communicated assertively rather than aggressively?

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ANGER

When it comes to anger management, strategies that can be used to deal with sudden anger outbursts are different to those that are appropriate

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for managing long-term anger and resentment. This is because the brain processes involved in each case are different. In order to understand how this works, it is useful to know a little about the physiological processes involved.

ANATOMY OF ANGER

At the front part of our brain is a large outer section called the **prefrontal cortex**. This area is responsible for thinking, judging, reasoning, evaluating, decision-making, planning and organising. It is sometimes referred to as the 'executive' part of the brain. Lower and deeper inside our brain is a section called the limbic system, which comprises a group of structures that together function as the brain's emotional centre. The limbic system is the more primitive part of the brain that, among other things, controls biological drives and responses. One of its structures is the **amygdala**, a small, almond-shaped mass on either side of the brain. The amygdala plays an important role in emotions and motivation, particularly those related to survival. In a separate area near the centre of the brain (just above the brainstem) is another structure called the **thalamus**. This structure is the 'gateway' for information coming from our senses, and it usually directs impulses generated by our sensory neurons to appropriate areas of the prefrontal cortex.

Under normal circumstances, as we receive information from the outside world via our five senses, our prefrontal cortex evaluates this information and gives it meaning. During normal functioning, the prefrontal cortex can modulate emotional impulses that are generated in the amygdala. However, if something particularly stressful or threatening is perceived, the thalamus (which acts as a 'relay station' directing information into appropriate parts of the brain) bypasses the prefrontal cortex altogether, and sends the information directly to the amygdala. If the incoming information triggers enough emotional charge, the amygdala creates a state of alarm that dominates current mental processes. This state is sometimes referred to as 'hot' emotion.

During this state the prefrontal cortex is overridden, and we are therefore unable to think logically or use sound judgement. Psychologist

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and author of the book *Emotional Intelligence* Daniel Goleman, coined the term 'amygdala hijack' to describe the overwhelming and disproportionate emotional response triggered in this process. During the 'hijack' we may say or do things that we will later regret. For most people it takes up to 20 minutes before information starts flowing to the prefrontal cortex (that is, for us to start thinking rationally again). During this time, a lot of damage can be done.

PREVENTING AN ANGRY EXPLOSION

People who are prone to angry outbursts know only too well the downside of uncontrolled anger—lost friendships, problems at work, broken marriages and social alienation, to name just a few. It is therefore important to have a strategy in place, ready to go as soon as the anger 'fuse' has been lit.

A key requirement for defusing acute anger is being able to recognise the warning signs. As our amygdala sounds the alarm we experience strong physical sensations: tension, heat, pounding heart and trembling. Our brain is 'on the warpath' and we feel ready to fight. Being vigilant to these sensations helps us to recognise that we are currently 'at risk', and alerts us of the need to intervene. The following steps can help to defuse an amygdala hijack.

DEFUSING AN AMYGDALA HIJACK

- 1 **Label and observe:** As soon as you notice the physical symptoms that signal the start of acute anger, mentally label the experience 'amygdala hijack'. Turn your attention inwards and observe what is happening inside your body. You may even visualise your amygdala pulsating and firing, sending 'high alert' signals to every part of your body. The very act of labelling and observing your internal state moves your attention from threat-focused information (the object of your anger) to your own cognitive processes. Sometimes this can reduce reactivity and enable parts of the prefrontal cortex to re-engage.
- 2 **Breathe:** Take in a few slow, deep breaths. This helps to lower physical arousal, distract from threat-focused thoughts and also re-engages the prefrontal cortex.
- 3 **Leave:** Physically remove yourself from the situation. Depending on the circumstances, you may go outside, go for a walk or go home. In a work environment or situation where leaving is not possible, walk away

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for just a few minutes by going to the bathroom or to another room and take some more breaths. Doing so will keep you out of harm's way during the height of the 'hijack' period when the urge to attack dominates.

- 4 **Exercise:** If possible do some exercise: walk, run up and down the fire escape stairs, clean the house, hit a pillow or do workout at the gym.

AFTER THE HIJACK—WHEN EMOTIONS ARE STILL HOT

Although the peak of our anger may last for only a short time, it is not unusual to continue feeling angry for hours or days afterwards. Anger can be self-perpetuating because when we feel angry, our mind produces ruminations that fuel the emotion. Feelings of anger are accompanied by recurring thoughts or images of the 'culprit' and their particular transgressions. Typically the thoughts pop into our mind repeatedly, sometimes dozens of times an hour. Ruminations about the culprit's various misdemeanours, the types of punishment we would like to dispatch and how sorry and powerless they would feel as a result fill our mind.

Most people acknowledge that in this state they feel drawn to their ruminations—imagining that we are despatching punishment feels good. However, ultimately they leave us feeling unsatisfied, as we also know the 'culprit' is not really being punished. In addition, our ruminations take up a huge amount of mental space, distracting us from other things and keeping us in an intimate relationship with the very person we detest. As though it's not enough that we feel hurt by their actions, we allow them to lodge inside our brain and continue to harass us.

MINDFULNESS

When emotions are 'hot', logical disputing is extremely difficult as our amygdala dominates our responses. We may even feel a 'tug of war' between the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of our brain) and our amygdala (primitive emotional response), as attempts to think rationally are overridden by primitive emotion. In these situations it may be helpful to use our mind in a different way.

Periods of intense unpleasant emotion (like anger, fear, frustration, guilt or impatience) can provide a good opportunity to practise mindfulness.

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During this process our aim is to be present with current experience, observing with curiosity and without judgement (see Chapter 12).

To engage mindfully during an episode of anger turn your attention inwards and notice what is happening for you in this moment. Observe how your thoughts dart around, focusing on themes related to injustice, betrayal and revenge, and how some thoughts keep returning. Notice the physical sensations in your body, including changes in muscle tension, breathing and heart rate. You may observe the desire to lash out and punish—if so, observe the impulse with curiosity.

Mindful attention to our thoughts, emotions, body sensations and behaviours helps us to step back and observe our inner experiences with curiosity and without judgement. We can become more aware of our ruminations, noticing each time they enter our mind. The practice of observing our own responses can produce a subtle shift in cognitive processes, which reduces our emotional temperature.

Watching thoughts pop into our mind, labelling them (e.g. ‘That’s my angry ruminations again’), and acknowledging that they are just thoughts can help to change the way we relate to them. While it does not necessarily switch off angry ruminations, it produces a space from which to observe them. In the book *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, the authors Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn describe the process of observing recurrent thoughts as being like watching a tape running in the mind. The tape ‘will continue to be an inconvenience until the “batteries” run down and it ceases of its own accord’. By mindfully observing our ruminations without engaging with them or elaborating on their contents, we create a space from which their ‘batteries’ can run down. Although mindfulness is not intended as a quick fix for upsetting emotions, many people report reduced intensity of emotion when they step back and observe it.

STAY GOAL-FOCUSED

Once the intense heat of anger has started to subside and the prefrontal cortex is engaged again, it becomes possible to begin thinking logically. Goal-focused thinking (see page 64) can be a useful tool for putting things

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into perspective. Ask yourself, 'What are my goals here?' There are usually very good reasons to work on releasing anger. For example:

- To get on with people.
- To have happy, well-adjusted children.
- To have a good relationship with my partner.
- To be successful in my career.
- To avoid unnecessary stress.
- To enjoy the evening.
- To look after my health.

Whatever goals are relevant at the time, ask yourself whether getting angry helps you to achieve those goals. When you look at the big picture, in most cases holding on to anger is self-defeating.

MORE TIME OUT

For most people, leaving the scene for even a few minutes will defuse a potentially explosive response. However, in situations where the desire to lash out continues, it may be necessary to take some additional time out. Depending on the circumstances, you might go for a walk, listen to music, do some gardening or make some unrelated telephone calls. Taking additional time out provides an opportunity to calm down, focus on your main goals and, if necessary, plan some possible solutions. It also reduces the likelihood of saying or doing things you may later regret.

If you are prone to angry outbursts, it is a good idea to plan your time-out activity. Once you recognise your anger surfacing, tell yourself 'I need time out', and move to the activity that you have prepared. This increases your ability to stay in control.

Rena goes into the bedroom and closes the door after failing to reason with her screaming two-year-old. Although Rena doesn't like to leave her daughter for long, taking some time out prevents Rena from losing her temper and smacking or yelling at her child.

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Elizabeth goes into the garden for a little while when her mother, who suffers from dementia, becomes too demanding and unreasonable. This gives Elizabeth a chance to calm down and remind herself that her mother can't help being the way she is.

*

Following an unpleasant confrontation with his boss, Rick calls his accountant, picks up the dry-cleaning and pays his gas bill. Although Rick needs to go back and speak to his boss, taking time out to focus on mundane issues gives him the space to regain his composure and put things back in perspective.

*

When Roy becomes angry at his teenage son's unreasonable behaviour, he goes into the lounge room and listens to his favourite opera. The time out gives him a chance to calm down and prevents him from yelling and therefore inflaming the situation.

REDUCE PHYSICAL AROUSAL

Anger triggers a state of heightened arousal that prepares our body for action. When we reduce our level of arousal, our anger also recedes and ruminations often diminish. For this reason, strategies that lower our arousal, such as physical exercise, slow breathing and deep relaxation can also reduce feelings of anger.

Some people are susceptible to becoming physically aroused very readily, and may therefore benefit from the regular practice of arousal modulation techniques. They may also benefit from avoiding high caffeine drinks, and getting adequate sleep each night (sleep deprivation makes



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us irritable). Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can also increase the likelihood of an aggressive outburst because of its disinhibiting effects.

EXERCISE

Physical exercise helps to expend the surge of energy generated by the fight-or-flight response and improves our mood. After exercising, our level of arousal drops substantially and our body starts to relax. Vigorous exercise also stimulates the release of endorphins—our body's natural opiates—which increase our sense of wellbeing. For this reason, exercise is an excellent anger management tool. While the most frequently recommended types of exercise are aerobic (brisk walking, jogging, cycling, swimming or working out in the gym), any sort of vigorous activity, including weightlifting, hitting a punching bag or even sexual activity can help to reduce anger levels. Perhaps less enjoyable but equally effective is vigorous housework—mopping the floor, washing the windows, vacuuming the house or digging in the garden.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

For thousands of years, the breath has been used in practices such as yoga and meditation for reducing physical arousal and inducing a state of inner calm. Slow breathing into the lower lungs is a useful strategy for lowering arousal when we feel angry or anxious. Repeating calming words, such as 'relax' or 'letting go' each time we breathe out can help to deepen our level of relaxation (see page 185).

DEEP RELAXATION

Deep relaxation is a physical state in which all of our major muscle groups are extremely relaxed. As it is difficult to practise deep relaxation during a highly aroused state, the technique is not suitable during acute anger (physical exercise, rhythmic breathing or mindful awareness are more appropriate at that stage). However, deep relaxation is a good maintenance tool which, when practised daily, helps to lower baseline arousal, and so reduces the predisposition towards rapid angry outbursts.

