

# COGNITIVE THERAPY CENTER of Long Island

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## Managing Anger

by

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Rianna is a beautiful, 27-year-old woman. She has come to therapy because her fiance Jack is threatening to call off their marriage.

Rianna: Jack insisted that I come to therapy. He's upset with me. He's upset because when I get mad I yell and scream at him.

Rianna has a "bad temper." "It's just the way I am," she says, "I've been this way my whole life." As a child she yelled at her mother and sister in the same way.

Although Rianna's angry outbursts only last a few minutes, Jack feels shaken and upset for hours afterwards, even days. Rianna has yelled at him in public places and in front of friends and family. Once she yelled at him in front of a business client and he nearly broke up with her.

Rianna: I don't know why Jack thinks it's such a big deal. I get mad, I blow up, and then it's over. It's not like I stay mad. I never carry a grudge, like he does.

Therapist: So do you think your anger is a problem?

Rianna: No.

Rianna feels *entitled* to yell when she feels angry. I ask her how it feels when she yells, and she tells me, "It feels like I am right."

Many patients come to therapy because they are having trouble managing their feelings. They feel *overwhelmed* by their feelings -- anxiety, grief, guilt, shame, jealousy, hopelessness -- and they cannot seem to get control on their own. However, when the issue is anger, often the person doesn't come. Many more people have anger problems than come to therapy trying to solve them.

This is not because managing anger is easy. On the contrary, developing effective ways to express anger is one of the greatest challenges in life. Then why is it? The answer is simple. People are often unmotivated to solve anger control problems.

Anxiety, grief, guilt -- these other emotions *feel bad*. They are inherently painful. When they are too intense they drive people into therapy. But anger does not feel bad. It feels good. While you might regret later what you did while angry, at the time, in the moment of expressing anger, it feels good. The problem is that it feels bad to the people around you.

Moreover, anger is often an effective strategy -- at least in the short run. When Rianna yells at Jack in public he will do anything to shut her up. He feels embarrassed and intimidated. Most of the time when she loses her temper, Rianna gets what she wants. She "wins." Rianna might win the battles and lose the war, however, especially if Jack leaves her. In the long run, her anger management problems are hurting her.

If you are considering therapy to help you with anger management problems, it is probably because you are faced with some terrible consequence of your anger. Your wife is threatening to leave you, you yelled at your boss and are in danger of losing your job, your children won't talk to you. Your anger is ruining something you care about, something you do not want to lose.

Here are the steps to learning to manage your anger.

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### Learning to Manage Anger

1. Accept that managing anger is a problem for you, and make a commitment to solve the problem.
2. Adopt a time out procedure.
3. Use cognitive and somatic self-calming techniques.
4. Handle the matter assertively, balancing maintaining your self-esteem with maintaining the relationship.

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#### 1. Accept that managing anger is a problem for you, and make a commitment to solve the problem.

Admitting that anger control is a problem is the hardest step. Force yourself to look at the long-term consequences of your anger -- how it is alienating the ones you love, holding you back in your career, hurting your life. Make a commitment to do the work necessary to overcome the problem.

#### 2. Adopt a time out procedure.

Consider the following "Anger Scale."

0	1	2	3	4
/	/	/	/	/
No Anger	Mild Anger	Moderate Anger	Extreme Anger	As Much Anger As Possible

Whenever your anger is “2” or greater on this scale -- moderate or greater -- acknowledge your anger to yourself, but give yourself a “time out” *before* you express your anger. A time out can mean removing yourself from the situation temporarily, or it can mean staying in the situation but refraining from acting or speaking. *In a time out, you can feel your anger, but you cannot act on your anger.* Stay in the time out until you are calm -- until your anger is “1” or less on the Anger Scale, or at most mild.

For example, Rianna told me about one situation with Jack where they were ordering flowers for the wedding, and disagreed about what to order.

Rianna: I got really mad at Jack. I felt like he didn't care what I wanted. I was about to yell at him in front of the florist and my mother, and I remembered what I agreed to do. So I told them I would be back and went and sat in the ladies' room to calm down.

Make a commitment to follow this procedure whenever you are angry. Your anger can serve as a cue that you are supposed to begin following it.

### 3. Use cognitive and somatic self-calming techniques.

You can help yourself calm down in the time out with cognitive and somatic techniques. Cognitive techniques focus on the thoughts that are going through your mind, and somatic techniques focus on the sensations in your body.

The most important cognitive technique is this: you must force yourself to consider the consequences of losing control of your anger in the situation. Will it really benefit you? Will it strengthen your bond with the people you care about, or will it damage that bond? And importantly, how will it affect the other person? How will it feel to them? Will it frighten or upset them? How would you feel if someone yelled at you?

Consider what you really want in the situation. Then behave strategically, not emotionally. Do what strengthens and maintains your relationships with the significant others in your life.

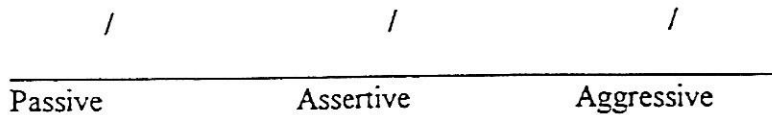
Rianna: While I was in the ladies' room I thought about how it wasn't really so important that I win. It was more important that I work on my relationship with Jack, that I

work on making it the best it can be. That's what I really want.

Somatically, use relaxation techniques such as meditation and breathing to calm your body. One simple technique is to count your breaths, purposely breathing slowly and deeply.

4. Handle the matter assertively, balancing maintaining your self-esteem with maintaining the relationship.

Think of a continuum from passive to assertive to aggressive.



When you are too passive, you give too much importance to supporting your relationship with the other person, and too little importance to your own self-esteem. You let the other person take advantage of you or hurt you without sticking up for yourself.

On the other hand, when you are too aggressive, you give too little importance to supporting the relationship, and too much importance to your self-esteem. You stick up for yourself so much that you damage your relationship with the other person. The other person feels that you are taking advantage of them or hurting them.

When you are assertive, you keep these two considerations in balance. You support the relationship *and* you support your self-esteem.

There are guidelines for you to follow if you want to behave assertively. First, stay calm. If you cannot present yourself calmly, then do not present yourself at all. Be respectful to both of you. Do not put yourself down, and do not attack or label the other person. Simply state what the person has *done* that has upset you. Tell the person clearly how you feel about what they have done, and what you want from them instead.

Try to see the other person's point of view, and validate it. Listen to the other person as you would want them to listen to you..

For example, when Rianna came out of the ladies' room, she did not yell at Jack or call him an insensitive jerk. Rather, she calmly told him that she felt he was not listening to her, and that this was making her feel like he didn't care about what she wanted. She asked him to listen to her. Jack was sympathetic, and he tried to listen better. The end result was that Rianna and Jack felt closer to one another.

The answer to situations that make you angry is almost always to be assertive. You will find that if you take this approach, both your self-esteem and your relationships with others will be enriched.

Rianna and Jack, like all the patients I write about, are fictitious. However, they are realistic.