

## Managing Intense Emotions

After a brain injury, many individuals with lived experience and family members experience a number of strong emotions. Many people say that one of the most difficult emotions to handle is anger. Anger can weaken your ability to solve problems effectively, make good decisions, handle changes, and get along with others. Concerns about anger control are very common. In fact, many people say that they feel angry more often, get angry more easily, and have more difficulty controlling their anger than they did before the injury. This article provides information about controlling your anger after an injury, the dangers of anger, recognizing early warning signs for anger, and ideas about how to better control anger.

### Why is controlling anger so hard?

For many people, family members and individuals with a brain injury alike, controlling anger can be more difficult after an injury. Anger may present in many ways including irritability, hostility, yelling, cursing, and even threatening or being physically aggressive with others. There are several reasons why you and/or your loved ones may have difficulty managing anger effectively.

- A brain injury can cause chemical changes in the brain, making it harder to manage anger and frustration.
- There are many changes after an injury. You may be upset by changes in your capabilities, for example, your ability to participate in activities you previously enjoyed.
- Sometimes people try to regain control over their lives through the expression of anger.
- You may find that people do not understand you. You may feel frustrated with your insurance company and treatment providers, and you may feel like people do not understand you or the circumstances your family is experiencing.

After an injury, many people encounter a number of problems they do not know how to solve along with very few solutions. All of these problems may make you feel hopeless and out of control.

### The dangers of anger

Anger can be dangerous because you may not be thinking clearly, when you speak or act. Many people often regret things they have done or said in anger later on. Anger can cause you to hurt yourself or

others physically or emotionally; make people avoid you or be afraid of you; contribute to feelings of depression, loneliness, or isolation; be a factor in poor decision making; and add to your list of problems. As you can see, anger does not tend to do many positive things for people. Your best bet is to begin to recognize when you are getting angry to avoid losing your temper.

### **What are some of the early warning signs of anger?**

The first step in controlling your own anger is recognizing the early warning signs. Early warning signs are emotional or physical changes you may notice as you begin to feel angry. Here is a list of common early warning signs. Review the list and see if you can recognize additional early warning signs you would like to add to the list.

- Muscles tensing, clenching your jaw or fists, or tightening your shoulders
- Feeling your face flush or feeling hot
- Noticing your heart beating faster than usual
- Churning or knots in your stomach
- Headaches
- Pacing
- Over or under eating
- Feelings of being sad, overwhelmed, impatient, or irritated

There are patterns of thinking that can make you and/or your family members more prone to anger. People that are angry more often tend to blame other people for their problems. People get angry more often when they take things personally or believe others are out to get them. Try to prioritize the big and small issues in your life. You will feel better when you tackle the important issues and do not sweat the small stuff.

### **Tips and ideas for controlling anger.**

Once you recognize your early warning signs for anger, you can take steps to help yourself cope with anger more effectively. Here is a list of strategies. Talk these ideas over with trusted family, friends, or professionals and pick out some tips you think will work for you and your family:

- Recognize that you have the power to control your emotions.
- Controlling your emotions is a skill. The more you practice, the better you will get.
- Remember that ups and downs are normal parts of life. Realize that it is normal to feel angry about what has happened to you, but if you stay angry, and take your anger out on others, you

are just making things worse. Instead of focusing on the downs, try to focus on the good things in your life and look forward to the ups!

- Explore ways to relax. Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Do not say or do the first thing that comes to mind. Count to ten. Waiting to respond can help you consider other people's feelings before you speak or act.
- Consider taking a break or leaving the situation. Oftentimes, when interactions get heated, it is best to take some time away and come back to the conversation after you have calmed down. Perhaps, you can make an agreement with other family members that you will state that you need to take a break. Don't forget to agree on a time to resume the discussion later.
- Make plans in advance to handle situations that cause anger. There may be a few circumstances that you know are going to upset you. Plan to use strategies to manage your anger in these situations ahead of time.
- Try to keep an open mind. Often people get angry when they think they know what another person is saying. Remind yourself that your family and friends are trying to help in the best way they know how. In order to reduce misunderstandings, try to repeat what you heard the other person say, "So what you are telling me is that you do not think it is a good idea for me to stay at home alone."
- Explain yourself calmly. Many people get angry when they feel misunderstood. Try to be positive and sensitive to other people's feelings. Doing so will make it easier for others to understand you.
- Identify constructive ways to deal with anger. Many people say they feel better when they go for a run, play a video game, write in a journal, take a walk, or talk with a friend. Having strategies at your fingertips will help you blow off some steam when you begin to feel irritated.
- Give yourself credit when you do control your anger. Instead of beating up on yourself, praise yourself when you do keep your emotions under control. Also, ask yourself what was different about situations in which you are able to control your anger. Recognizing the circumstances or the actions you took not to get angry can be a powerful tool in learning to control your anger better.

### **Are you stuck being angry? You need not be.**

Remember, people who are angry for a long time often have trouble seeing the positive and expressing positive feelings. If you feel uncomfortable about your anger, talk with trusted family, friends, or

professionals about your feelings. Also, consider joining a support group, so you can learn how others have dealt successfully with difficult feelings.

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