

Anger

Boiling over? Our expert has wise words on how to stop yourself losing the plot...



Q *Every little thing seems to drive me mad these days, from people dropping litter in the street outside my house to bad drivers cutting in front of me on my way to work. Even when I get home at night, I'm still fuming about things that have happened during the day. Can you recommend some ways I can defuse my anger (that don't involve drinking alcohol?!)* **GF Liskeard**



Clinical psychologist Kevin Simpson says: As Buddha famously said: "Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die". In a nutshell, the only person who really suffers is you. In fact, lots of

medical research now shows that frequent anger has a corrosive impact on our body's health, especially our heart.

A few years ago, I was late for work and found myself driving behind a car tootling along a country lane at just 15 miles per hour. I started to get cross at being held up and had lots of unkind thoughts about the driver.

I then noticed that the driver was a close neighbour. She is a lovely, somewhat frail, lady. She takes life slowly. Instantly, I calmed down and my anger ebbed away. The situation remained the same but my perspective, or thoughts, had fundamentally changed.

The important thing to remember is that it is our thoughts about other people and things that are the problem. If we change our thoughts then we can change our anger.

When we get stressed we tend to turn every setback or annoyance into a major big-deal. Psy-

chologists call this tendency 'catastrophising'. "How could they do that?" we say, "I don't believe it. This is absolutely outrageous". We turn everything into a catastrophe when it is often merely an inconvenience.

In this situation, consider asking yourself, "How important will this be in six months' time?" If your answer is "not very" then you might want to reconsider your response.

Our expectations, or inner-rules, can also make a big contribution to our anger. We carry around a set of rules in our head, such as "People shouldn't drop litter", or that "Life must be fair". If these rules are too black-and-white or rigid we can often get angry. Try softening the rules by changing them to a preference.

So, rather than saying, "People should be respectful", we might say, "I would prefer people to be respectful, but in the real world not everyone behaves in this way". We might still get annoyed, but softening the 'shoulds' and 'musts' may take the edge of any rage.

Finally, the big thing to remember here is that we have choices. Once we really understand that our thoughts fuel our anger, and not the situation itself, it can make a massive difference. We might decide, "I think this person is behaving badly, and I am getting annoyed, but I am not going to give them permission to get me stressed out. I will let it go."

We can choose to recognise we are having these thoughts but at the same time decide not to act on them. Good luck.

Kevin Simpson is a clinical psychologist for Outlook South West, which helps people with anxiety and depression. See www.outlooksw.co.uk

Three Expectations that Cause Anger

Kevin Simpson tackles the key ideas that can get us into trouble if we hold them too rigidly:

Life Should Be Fair:

Unfortunately, it isn't. Bad things do happen to good people. Learning to accept that life isn't fair can be surprisingly empowering. When we can accept this we learn to stop complaining and get on with taking whatever action needs to be taken.

People Should Always Be Respectful:

This is a really tricky one. People are disrespectful because they may be stressed with their own life struggles or they are just really poor communicators. If you firmly believe that no one should ever be disrespectful then you will find yourself getting angry on a regular basis. Try turning the rule into a preference. It would be nice if people were respectful but the world is a complex place and it won't always happen.

People Should Always Be Reasonable:

What might be reasonable to us might be totally unreasonable to someone else. Learn to accept that people see their world from their own perspective, and they nearly always think that they are right. Rather than forcing them to agree with our point of view, we can explore how they see things differently.