

Cycle of Anger

What is anger?

Anger is an emotion that everyone feels. Anger has various functions within our body and ourselves. Anger helps trigger our self-defence mechanisms, which help keep us safe; it helps us express ourselves and communicate our negative feelings; and it can reflect our boundaries. Anger is something that is guided by our values and insecurities.



Feeling angry is normal, however, it's important that we learn to cope with our anger in healthy and constructive ways. An important step in coping with our anger is understanding the phases of anger. We call it the cycle of anger.

Cycle of Anger (Therapist Aid, 2016)

Anger typically progresses in phases or steps, which make up a cycle. This visual comes from Therapist Aid and is a helpful way to understand how the phases of anger progress.



The first phase is a triggering event. Usually, anger starts when an event or situation triggers our anger. A trigger is anything that reminds us of past trauma or brings up intense emotions. Triggers can include images, sounds, locations, smells, and more.

After experiencing a triggering event, then we have the second phase, which is negative thoughts. This phase involves irrational and negative thoughts that occur as the result of the trigger. These thoughts often consume our focus in the moment.



The next phase is the emotional response. Triggers and negative thoughts can lead to a vast array of negative emotions, even if these emotions don't make sense or seem irrational at the time. At this point in the cycle of anger, our anger is building, and we are getting closer to a response or reaction.





Next in the cycle of anger, we have the physical symptoms. Our body automatically and unconsciously responds to anger with different physical symptoms. These symptoms typically connect to what we feel when our self-defence response is triggered. These physical symptoms are unique to each individual and may include a racing heart, sweating, shaking, a blank mind, and more.



The last phase in the cycle of anger is the behavioral response. The behavioral response is where we react in anger based on our thoughts, feelings, and physical symptoms. This is the phase where we act on our anger.

Let's work through the cycle using an example; say I am a parent with a young toddler who is playing with their snack and throwing food instead of eating it. The triggering event could be when my toddler throws a cup of juice on the floor. In the second phase of the cycle, my negative thoughts might include, "I am a terrible parent who can't even get their child to eat their snack." The emotional response could include feelings of frustration or stress because my child is wasting food. The physical symptoms I experience might include a racing heart, clenched fists, sweating, or shaking. In the last phase of the cycle, my behavioral response could be yelling, criticizing my child, or tossing the cup across the room. As we can see from this example, my anger was building as I processed the situation until I exploded.

Important Takeaways

Now that we understand the cycle of anger, where do we go from there? Well, the cycle of anger can help us understand patterns of anger within ourselves. Once we understand our own patterns of anger we can try to prevent anger before it gets to the behavioral response phase.



Ask yourself: What things trigger my anger? What negative thinking patterns do I get lost in? What are my emotional responses to anger? What physical symptoms of anger do I experience?

Once you start to recognize your patterns in response to anger, we can sense when our anger is coming and do something to cope with our anger.

If you want to talk more about this, there is support available. **Call Family Service Saskatoon at 306-244-0127 in Saskatoon.** You can also check out our other videos on anger and our anger support groups at **familyservice.sk.ca**