

Anger and Frustration Management after Brain Injury

Anger is a common problem after brain injury. This is partly because reduced ability and independence after the injury can be really frustrating. Another reason is that parts of the brain that help regulate emotions are often injured in a way that makes it easier to become irritated. It helps, therefore, to become more expert at anger management skills.

In this article, we'll focus on three such skills, one that involves taking a temporary time-out from the frustrating situation as soon as you start to get annoyed, one that involves adjusting expectations, and one that involves keeping your perspective. These techniques, and several others, are covered in the *Managing Anger and Frustration* chapter in my book:

Bouncing Back: Skills for Adaptation to Injury, Aging, Illness, and Pain

<https://www.amazon.com/Bouncing-Back-Skills-Adaptation-Illness/dp/0190610557>

Taking a Time-Out

Taking a "**time-out**" when frustrated or annoyed is one of the simplest but most effective ways to prevent anger reactions. Depending on the situation, this may involve either slowly counting to 10 or 20 before responding or taking a break from the situation to calm down.

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If you're planning to try this strategy with family members, coworkers, or close friends, it's a good idea to let them know ahead of time. You can explain what you'll be doing by saying something like this:

"I'm working on keeping my cool better when I get frustrated. One thing I'm trying is called 'time-out.' This means taking a break to calm down and gather my thoughts before I react in anger. When I do this, I'll sometimes just count to 10 or 20 before I react. Other times, when I need a longer break to calm down, I'll walk away.

"I'm doing this because I don't want to say or do anything hurtful. You can help by allowing me to take this time-out to calm myself down before we continue the discussion. And if you ever feel our discussions are getting too heated, I hope you'll also feel free to call a time-out. "Is it okay with you if we try this out, and do you have any questions for me?"

This explanation will help to keep them from interpreting your silence or walking away as a sign that you don't care. Letting them know ahead of time will also decrease the chance that they'll interrupt your time-out by following you or trying to continue the discussion before you're ready to resume.

As soon as you've calmed down, let the other person know that you're calling a "**time-in**" and ask if it's okay to continue the discussion.

And if you find yourself becoming agitated again, just take another time-out and perhaps work on this next technique.

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Adjusting Expectations

Sometimes the most effective way to reduce frustration and anger is to change the way we think about things. In many respects, anger reactions are not a direct result of other people's actions; they are instead a result of how we think about their actions.

Specifically, anger arises in us when we think in ways that are not fully realistic.

When we expect others to behave in a way that's different from how they actually behave, we set ourselves up to become frustrated, irritated, or outright angry. Likewise, unrealistic expectations of ourselves can set us up for self-directed frustration, irritation, or anger.

In most cases, we'll have more success in changing our expectations than in changing other people's behavior. So, a powerful way to reduce anger is to work on developing more realistic expectations. The unrealistic expectations that tend to trigger anger usually involve words such as:

- **Should** (e.g., They **should** do it my way.)
- **Shouldn't** (e.g., I **shouldn't** make mistakes.)
- **Right** (e.g., That's not **right**.)
- **Fair** (e.g., It's not **fair**.)
- **Must** (e.g., You **must** do as I say.)

Even though we may feel that our personal rules and expectations are entirely reasonable, the reality is that they aren't shared by everyone else. When our rules or expectations are "violated," we tend to react with anger. Such anger can be reduced by changing our expectations or "**should thoughts.**"

The first step is to become aware of when we're having these expectations, or "should thoughts," that lead to anger. Then we can substitute more realistic and tolerant thoughts. Examples of more realistic and tolerant thoughts include:

- It would be nice if everybody shared my (driving skills/wisdom/values/good manners/political views), but they just don't.
- Oh well. It takes all kinds.
- Whatever. It is what it is.
- Everybody makes mistakes. Nobody's perfect, including me.
- Perhaps common decency isn't so common after all.
- It's not really my job to police the world.
- I like it when people respect me, but there's no law that says they have to.
- I do nice things because I want to, not because I expect anything in return.
- I don't like this situation, but it's not under my control. I'll just bring it to the attention of a supervisor and not stress over it.

- An old one that parents often try to teach: Life isn't always fair.
- And a new one from popular culture: Haters gonna hate.

We can express our wishes and preferences, but recognize that, in most cases, people have the option to disregard them. Of course, some "should thoughts" are useful, especially when the situation is one we actually have some control over, a law or formal contract is being broken, or someone is in danger. In such cases, assertively communicating our expectations or calling upon appropriate authorities may well be a reasonable course of action.

Regarding the concept of "**fairness**," it's important to recognize that judgments of fairness depend upon one's point of view. Rather than fixating on the concept of fairness, and becoming angered by a perceived lack of fairness, we can step back and think about which course of action is most consistent with our values and most helpful for society.

Regarding the concept of "**rights**," it helps to be mindful of the distinction between **enforceable legal rights** and our own perceptions about **what seems good or proper**. For example, some people believe they have a "right" to be treated at all times with respect or courtesy, when in reality, in certain situations, this may just be their preference. We can feel free to not associate with people who don't show respect or courtesy towards us and to inform their supervisor if they have one, but we don't need to get unnecessarily worked up by confusing preferences for enforceable legal rights.

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Over the next few days, be alert to situations in which you feel frustrated, annoyed, or outright angry and pay attention to what thoughts or expectations fuel this reaction. As you become more aware of your "should thoughts," try to develop more adaptive ways of thinking about those situations.

Keeping Perspective

While "should thoughts" are the main fuel for most anger, two other unrealistic types of thought are also important to learn to recognize. One of these is a tendency to take other people's behavior personally, as in: "They deliberately did that just to irritate me."

It's true that occasionally people really do mean to offend or annoy us, but often they don't. They may just be unfriendly or unhelpful because they're having a bad day. They may just really enjoy loud conversation or loud music without specifically intending to upset us. They may be honking or waving obscene gestures at someone else. They may even have hit the horn button by accident.

Being able to step back and think about other possible reasons for the person's behavior helps us to not automatically feel personally attacked. And when we don't feel personally attacked, we're less likely to respond in anger. By stepping back for a moment, we may even sometimes be able to use our power of empathy to understand a bit about the person's motivation. If we can put ourselves in the offensive person's shoes, we may be able to feel a little less offended.

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Here are some examples of things we can say to ourselves to take annoying behavior less personally and try to feel some empathy for the other person:

- Maybe he's just having a bad day.
- Maybe she didn't mean it personally.
- She's got a miserable job. Who's to say I'd do any better?
- He probably doesn't know any better.
- Maybe she wasn't raised to see things the way I see things.
- Maybe he was just trying to be helpful.
- They're probably under stress and doing the best they can right now.
- And an old saying: Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

The other type of unrealistic thinking that fuels anger is exaggeration of danger or harm. People sometimes call this "**making a mountain out of a mole hill.**" Psychologists sometimes call this "**catastrophizing.**" The tendency to exaggerate danger or harm can fuel both anger and anxiety.

Yes, you may not like what someone has done, but stop and ask yourself if it's really dangerous or harmful enough to warrant an angry reaction. Even if a situation really is dangerous or harmful, wouldn't you generally be better off focusing on solutions rather than wasting time reacting in anger?

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Here are some examples of what you might say to yourself to avoid overreacting in this way:

- Will this really seem that important a year or two from now?
- I don't like it, but it's not the end of the world.
- Is it possible that it's not as bad as it seems? Even situations that seem bad often have a “silver lining.”
- I'll just use this to make myself stronger.
- Is someone trying to manipulate me into overreacting?
- Is it really worth going to jail or the hospital over this?
- And this old classic from childhood: Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.