

Chill FACTOR

Temper flaring?

Cool it down—and calm your life—
with our smart strategies for managing
those mad, bad moods.

by Robin Wester

I LIKE TO THINK I'M A FAIRLY RELAXED PERSON, but the truth is, my frustrations boil over just a little too often. Like the feud I'm having with my office mate, Beth. The two of us share a suite—she has a small art gallery and I have a one-room office space. Here's what happened: One Saturday Beth used a master key to unlock my door to temporarily store a stack of canvases. She had done this once before and I politely had told her, "Please ask next time."

I showed up unexpectedly that day to find stuff stacked everywhere. My space is my sanctuary away from the crazy energy of my family life, so it felt like a huge invasion. Shaking with outrage, I printed out a furious letter and taped it to Beth's door. It ended with, "Saying you're sorry won't cut it."



Time moved on. Daily, Beth and I passed in the hall without so much as eye contact. The air was arctic, our discomfort bigger than any pile of paintings. I ended up regretting the letter and was willing to own up to that. But I couldn't get past the fact that she had deliberately violated the boundary I'd set.

I was stuck, which isn't so surprising. Anger is tricky. Research shows it can help or hurt us, depending on whether we focus it or let it run out of control. Women who routinely suppress their wrath increase their risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and other stress-related illnesses—and cut years off their lives—according to a long-term University of Michigan study. Yet a different study says venting can actually be less useful than doing nothing. Other research shows that those who fly off the handle often and uncontrollably are more pessimistic, lack social support and feel they don't have much say in what happens in their lives.

Most experts do agree that habitual venting just ends up being practice for getting angrier. Plus, it doesn't do anything to resolve the conflict. "More often than not, the person you're raging at is

going to respond to your outburst—not to the problem that needs to be solved," says Robert Allan, Ph.D., author of *Getting Control of Your Anger* (McGraw Hill).

Of course, it's only human to get irritated. According to a Hofstra University study, most of us report feeling some degree of pique at least a few times a week, and it's not always a bad thing. "Focused ire can mobilize you to take action, set limits on the demands others make, think about why something matters so much or defend yourself if attacked," says Tony Hope, M.D., coauthor of *Managing Your Mind Guide* (Oxford University Press). But he also cautions, "It can blind you to other ways of seeing things, sharing responsibility and finding peaceful options to dealing with difficulties."

What makes anger so hard to deal with is how deeply personal it can be.

“When you are **incensed**, you're blaming **someone else** for your situation.”

For starters, it always involves your own unique judgment. "When you get incensed, you're blaming someone else—or the world—for your situation," says W. Doyle Gentry, Ph.D., author of *Anger Management for Dummies* (Wiley). "It's your statement about right and wrong." But that doesn't mean somebody has actually done you wrong. "We may get riled up because we're in the habit of interpreting a situation in a certain way or because it opens up an old emotional wound," says Thubten Chodron, an American Buddhist nun and author of *Working with Anger* (Snow Lion). "Others confronted with the exact same situation might not blow up like you."

I considered Chodron's words and had to admit that someone else might have overlooked the pile of stuff, or just moved it. Privacy is *my* issue. And, truthfully, staying mad was only keeping me miserable. I was living the old joke: "Holding on to a grudge is like

swallowing rat poison and expecting the rat to die." I needed to let go of my anger: look at it, understand the trigger, own up to my overreaction and work toward forgiveness. The following steps, offered by professionals, helped turn my acrimony around.

Step One >>

Admit how mad you are.

You can't deal with something when you don't know what it is. "If anger isn't identified, you're more likely to pretend to yourself it's not there. That gives it the chance to evolve into frustration, stress, sadness or depression," cautions Martha Straus, Ph.D., author of *Adolescent Girls in Crisis* (W.W. Norton). "Or you might numb the feeling with a self-defeating action like overeating."



Get in touch with your **body** to take your **mind** off the **thoughts** that are keeping you **churned** up.

most effective calming method. "Reading or watching TV works, but physical activity is best," says Nick DeFillipis, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Argosy University in Atlanta. "It releases endorphins, the feel-good brain chemicals, and relaxes the muscles that tighten when you're furious."

Step Four >>

Open up to a good friend.

Women tend to ruminate over what irks them and then end up either rationalizing their anger or blaming themselves. "Someone who really knows you can help you see the situation from a different angle, sort out your emotions and develop a better perspective," says

Step Two >>

Get out of there—fast.

During the first few minutes of a face-off, emotions peak as your adrenal glands release epinephrine and norepinephrine—the fight-or-flight hormones. "Leaving the situation gives your body time to calm down and your mind a chance to change its perception," says David A. Anderson, Ph.D., a professor of economics at Centre College, in Danville, Kentucky, who interviewed 300 prisoners about what led up to their crimes and concluded that it takes less than a minute to go from fury back to rational thought. "When you leave the scene you put a critical wedge between yourself and the target of your anger, and, ideally, avoid a response you might later regret."

Step Three >>

Move—walk, do yoga.

Being in touch with your body takes the focus off the thoughts that are keeping you churned up. In a recent study at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, researchers found that distraction was the

Recession Rage

Watch 10 minutes of TV news and the sheer volume of painful, ugly events can leave you feeling helpless—and angry. There's war, famine, terrorism and natural disasters. Not to mention the upended global economy and the pocketing of millions of taxpayer dollars by U.S. executives. "It's human to fume over events beyond our control," says W. Doyle Gentry, Ph.D. But ultimately it's not very useful or productive. With effort and insight, though, you can turn your feelings around.

- **Take the long view.** Remind yourself that everything goes in cycles—weather, seasons, conflicts. Tell yourself, "This too shall pass."
- **Create control.** If you're worried about natural disasters, find out whether your town has a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and where you can train to be a first responder. Check out citizencorps.gov/cert/ for more information. If public policy is driving you crazy, keep up a steady flow of brief, to-the-point e-mails, calls or letters to politicians, advocacy organizations and editorial pages.
- **Focus on the positive.** Make a list of the things in your life, big and small, that bring you joy and fulfillment. Schedule into every day at least one thing that nurtures you, even if it's just allowing yourself to sit and read a novel for 20 minutes after dinner.
- **Think kindly.** Buddhist nun and author Thubten Chodron says we can always make a difference through what she calls the ripple effect. "Send out good wishes, even to those you perceive as your enemy, and you'll be making the world a better place."

Press "1" for Aggravation

Even relatively calm people sometimes get worked up dealing with customer service. "Most operators are pressured to get people off the phone as quickly as possible, whether or not the problem is solved," says Dr. Tony Hope. And that can make it feel like they're trying to blow you off. But instead of going ballistic, get what you need.

- **Clarify your case.** State your goal in one concise sentence and refer to it repeatedly during the conversation.
- **Focus on facts.** Use laws and documents to support your position; if possible, prepare ahead of time.
- **Stick to your story.** Resist the impulse to change the way you present the facts when you meet resistance. Instead, calmly and methodically repeat the key points.
- **Don't make it personal.** Take some deep, slow breaths and do your best to stay emotionally detached. Mentally observe the encounter as if you're just a bystander.
- **Cultivate compassion.** Remind yourself that it's probably not the person but the system that's giving you the runaround. Keep some kindness in your voice—or at least a respectful tone.
- **Be relentless.** If you're still getting nowhere and asking for a supervisor doesn't yield satisfaction, put your complaint in writing (keep in brief); address it to the CEO of the company, and send the letter return receipt requested.

Eve A. Wood, M.D., author of *10 Steps to Take Charge of Your Emotional Life* (Hay House). "Also, just telling your story dilutes the emotional charge."

Step Five >>

Let go of resentment.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 94% of Americans believe it's important to forgive. Yet the same poll shows only half of us put that belief into practice. "Bearing a grudge hurts no one but ourselves," says Chodron. But letting go takes time, effort and intention, starting with changing the way we think. "Your reaction is your own responsibility," she adds. "Once you realize that, you're no longer handing your power over to anyone else, and you're now the one deciding what to do or say next." In other words, you're responding rather than reacting—and you can move on.

It took me more than five uncomfortable weeks to release my resentment toward Beth. One morning,

when I saw her trying to straighten a painting on the wall, phone propped against her shoulder, while a delivery man was waiting for her signature, I finally understood her thoughtlessness. As a single mother running her own business, Beth is chronically overwhelmed; she has to make quick decisions and some may not be the best. Once empathy took over, I was ready to resolve the problem between us. I walked into her office and said, "I overreacted and I'm sorry" and invited her to lunch.

Beth graciously accepted my apology, but she didn't offer one of her own and didn't respond to my invitation. For an instant, I felt a stab of bitterness. I'd offered an olive branch. Wasn't I owed? Then I reminded myself, that letting go of anger takes time—for other people as well as me. And, most important, forgiveness isn't something I do to make other people do what I want. It's what I do to keep my own peace of mind. ●