

Anger and Irritation

I see quite a number of boys with anger problems. For some, it's what we might call an anger management issue – for deep reasons that we need to explore, they are living on the brink of rage most of the time; quite often it breaks out in ways that are damaging to themselves and others.

More common, however, are boys who suffer from extreme irritation. They often feel that their life would be so much better if only 'this other person' could sort themselves out! 'This other person' might be a sibling or a teacher or a parent – there are loads of possibilities – but the client sees the issue as being caused by 'this other person'.

And then, of course, there's the general grumpiness and feeling of bad temper that is often a feature of being a teenager and which bursts out occasionally in rows with parents or siblings.

So how do you know whether to get some counselling or coaching? Try this quiz! Go with the nearest answer to what you think.

1. What does being angry look like for you?
 - a) Shouting, swearing and even getting violent. It causes trouble at home or school or both.
 - b) Feeling extremely irritated and sometimes really letting rip.
 - c) Feeling grumpy and low some of the time. From time to time, having an argument.
2. How often do you feel angry (as defined by your answer to 1.)
 - a) It feels like most of the time
 - b) A lot of the time
 - c) Some of the time
3. What do other people think of you?
 - a) They certainly know I've got an anger problem!
 - b) They probably think I'm really stressy – but can't they see it's their fault?
 - c) They say things like 'Uh, what's that face for?' Mum and Dad grumble about me being a 'typical teenager.'
4. How do you feel about your anger?
 - a) Scared. It feels like it controls me, rather than the other way round. I worry that I'm going to get into really serious trouble one day.
 - b) It's not my fault! It's other people – they drive me mad!
 - c) It makes me fed up – I didn't used to feel like this. But it's not all the time, thank goodness.

5. On a scale of 0 – 10, how bad do you think your anger is? 10 is as bad as it could get.
- a) 7 and above
 - b) 3 to 6
 - c) Less than 3
6. How do you feel physically when you're angry?
- a) Ready to punch something – in fact I sometimes do! It's like this red mist comes down and I can't contain myself.
 - b) Tense, hot, maybe like I'm going red, maybe a bit shaky. Like I'm having to hold everything in.
 - c) Tense, maybe clenching my teeth or feeling a bit headachy
7. How much is it affecting your friendships?
- a) I've got a reputation. I think some people avoid me.
 - b) A bit. Sometimes my friends go on about my temper and how stressy I am.
 - c) It doesn't really. To be honest, we're all a bit the same. We all get grumpy at times – mostly about our parents or school!

Results

Mostly As

Sounds like you do have a significant anger problem and it'd be a good idea to get some counselling or coaching. It could affect the rest of your life and that wouldn't be good! It would still be useful to read the following notes, though and start using the strategies.

Mostly Bs

Start by reading the info below about Extreme Irritation. Sounds like you may need to try thinking in a different way about who is responsible for your anger! Maybe lower your expectations of other people – no one's perfect, including you! You're teetering on the edge here. Maybe ask yourself what impact you're having on other people in your life and whether you're happy with that. You might like to do some googling about anger management and techniques for getting calm. If you had a few As, consider getting some counselling and coaching.

Mostly Cs

Sounds like you're suffering from raging hormones and the frustrations of growing up! It should pass! Meantime, however, try to avoid saying anything that your loved ones will find difficult to forgive and forget. 'I hate you – I wish you weren't my Mum/Dad' is very hard to hear, even when it's said in the middle of a teen tantrum! Try giving them some slack – they're doing their best, the poor dears.

Extreme Irritation

So mostly what bugs you is 'this other person'. Maybe there is more than one! Let's call 'this other person' TOP for ease.

In counselling, we don't have the power to do anything about TOP. All we can do is address how you are responding to him or her and look at whether actually, you could do something differently! Instead of always being reactive to TOP, maybe you could be proactive? Instead of waiting to be irritated or outraged, maybe you could take steps to avoid that?

ASSUMPTIONS

The first thing the client can do, is to address his or her **ASSUMPTIONS**. Irritated and outraged people often assume the following:

1. **They can't help being irritated.** It's all down to TOP. If only TOP did what as they did, all would be fine! It's just that TOP does these things which are soooo irritating! Alternatively, they may blame their stress, their exhaustion, or their worries. Hence, they are actually giving themselves permission to be annoyed. In that sense, they are very much in control.
2. **They have no choice.** Of course not! It's all down to TOP and they are powerless to change things.
3. **Frustration is intolerable.** When life doesn't go their way, when someone doesn't see things as they do or when their best-laid plans get interrupted, deep down they believe that they cannot tolerate it. It is like the build-up of steam in an overheated steam engine. They think they need to blow off the steam in order to be OK. In fact, the more annoyance you allow yourself to express, the more annoyance you are likely to generate. Venting releases the stress hormone cortisol!
4. **It's more important to win than to be right.** Highly irritated people often have the idea that their status is at stake when there is conflict. TOP is, in some way, a threat. If losing an argument, the irritable person can experience a loss of self-esteem. At that moment, they need to assert their authority, even if they are wrong. When it is certain that they are wrong, they will find a way to prove that TOP is more wrong.
5. **"Respect" means that TOP does things their way.** To them, "disrespect" is intolerable. Making a lot of noise and threatening is often their way of reasserting their right to "respect" by others. "Respect" is seen as a right but often the right of TOP to "respect" for his or her very different point of view is overlooked.
6. **TOP should understand them and especially that they didn't mean what they did or said when they were irritated.** This relates to numbers 1 and 2. After all, it's not their fault – they were provoked! Really, it's all down to TOP. They don't get it that other people are legitimately hurt, embarrassed, humiliated, or afraid – or just see things differently!
7. **They know what TOP is thinking!** They make maybe the biggest assumption of all – that they know what's going on for TOP! They then react to that. Eg. 'He's doing it just to annoy me!' 'She's trying to get at me!' 'That teacher hates me – that's why he does it!'

So what's the alternative?

1. **Everyone is in charge of their own emotions and how they act out.**
2. **Everyone has a choice about how they feel and behave.**
3. **Frustration can be tolerated.**
4. **Winning is not the be all and end all.**
5. **Respect needs to be mutual.**
6. **Understanding cannot be assumed.**
7. **No one really knows what someone else is thinking.**

And what do you then do about it?

Whether you have a deep-seated anger issue or you are more superficially irritable, the first thing to do is to accept the 7 principles above, the first being the most critical. 'I can't help it – I just have a quick temper/am an angry person/was born this way etc etc', just doesn't cut it, I'm afraid.

We have 4 basic emotional states:

- Happy
- Sad
- Frightened
- Angry

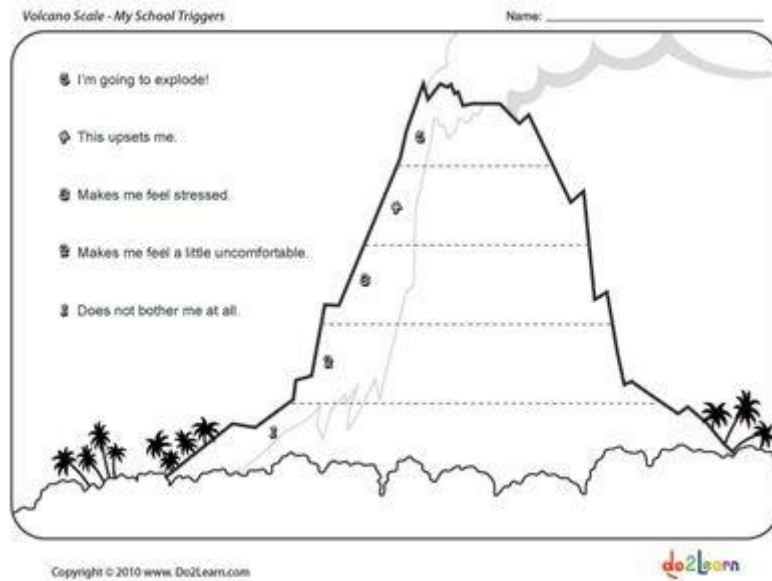
(Some people would argue that we have a fifth - disgust. You'll see this in film 'Inside Out'. But others would argue that Disgust is merely part of Fear.)

We all feel these emotions at different times – one state has no greater weight than another in a healthy person.

It is each person's responsibility to manage his or her mood as best they can in order to feel healthy themselves and not to have a detrimental effect on others. It's not easy – there are no quick fixes – but, just as with anything else, with practise, it becomes easier.

These are some strategies that work, with perseverance:

- Learn to notice the rise of anger. Use this diagram to write down the feelings you have in your body at the different stages. If you can clock what's happening in your body (eg. for me an early warning sign is tension in my face and mouth), you can do something to stop the anger increasing.



Once you've noticed that your anger is rising, you need to do something fast. If you don't, the chances are that it will continue to rise and you'll end up with an eruption. So, what do you do?

1. **DEEP, SLOW BREATHS** right down to your diaphragm. You are telling your brain that all is well and that there is no call for extra breath. You are not going to be fighting anyone! If you breathe deeply and slowly, whatever thoughts you are having, the brain will pick up that your body is behaving calmly and will not flood your system with the anger hormones, adrenalin and cortisol.

2. **7/11 BREATHING** is a very effective version of 1. You breathe in whilst counting to 7 and out whilst counting to 11 at your own pace. The breathing out does the opposite to your body of the fight/flight response. It engages the Parasympathetic Nervous System and instead of preparing you for action, prepares you to 'rest and digest'. Out-breaths slow your heart rate, decrease your blood pressure and dilate your pupils, lowering your emotional arousal in the process. If you find 7/11 breathing too difficult or you worry that other people will notice, try 5/9 or even 3/7. The crucial thing is to make the *out* breath longer than the *in* breath.

3. **RELAX YOUR STANCE and DROP YOUR ATTENTION TO YOUR FEET.** Drop your shoulders, unclench your hands and let them hang loose, soften your knees and your bum, unclench your teeth and your jaw. Send your attention and your thoughts to your feet! Again, you are telling your brain that what is needed is calm, not aggression – that you must focus on something else, not your angry thoughts. If you are sitting, try **FOFBOC**. This stands for Feet on floor, Bum on chair. All you need to do is sit with your feet flat on the floor and relax, just as if you were standing, and again send your attention to your feet.

4. **LISTEN. KEEP YOUR MOUTH CLOSED.** A 'win' here is keeping calm, not 'winning' the argument. Dale Carnegie, author of the huge best-seller 'How to win friends and influence people' points out that there is no such thing as 'winning an argument.' If you feel you've 'scored', you can guarantee that your opponent will simply feel more entrenched in his or

her viewpoint and antagonistic towards you – so what have you actually gained? If you really feel you have to say something, save it for later, when you've had time to think what you really want to say and when the heat of the moment is passed. **In other words, WAIT!**

4. If necessary, **WALK AWAY**. If you really feel you're going to lose it or the disrespect you are being shown is extreme, politely walk away. Be firm, be clear. If the other person tries to make you stay, keep walking. You can say something polite but firm such as, 'This conversation is not helping either of us' or 'I'm happy to talk about this later when we've both calmed down.' Avoid saying anything which blames the other person.

This can be tricky in a school situation. Teachers cannot be models of perfection all the time – they too get angry. If you get told 'Come back here! Don't walk away whilst I'm talking to you!', say something polite like, 'I'm walking away because I don't feel able to contain my anger. Please don't stop me.' Then keep walking and go to a place where you can calm down eg. the medical centre or the counselling room. You could also go to one of the pastoral staff such as a head of section or Mr Thomson. It is very important that you remain calm and polite!

5. **VENT ON YOUR OWN IF NECESSARY**. If you have managed to consider TOP's point of view and accepted that you cannot really know what they're thinking, if you have decided to respect TOP regardless of their viewpoint and have unhooked yourself from any need to 'win', you may be feeling fine. But that's all a lot easier said than done. You may find that after all this calmness and control, you need some way to release your feelings. If you've ended up feeling pent up and ratty, it's good to effect a 'state-change', so your mind and body can move into a different and pleasanter gear! This is the moment when cats get kicked, things get broken and completely innocent bystanders get blasted – so the aim is to vent safely! You could try:

Doing some very vigorous exercise.

Playing some loud music – especially good if it's you playing the instrument!

Singing

Having a big sort out of some messy part of your life/room that's been annoying you

Tearing up rough paper

Thumping your pillow

Having a shower

Having a cup of tea and a biscuit or piece of chocolate. (Be restrained – you don't want to substitute a comfort eating habit for an anger problem!)

Phoning a friend. (Be careful with this one – it's easy to wind yourself up again if you start going on and on about the situation. Explain it once, get some sympathy and then move on. This conversation is not about confirming what an absolute *****, so'n'so is! Avoid the words. 'And another thing...!')

Something else that you really enjoy!

What you're aiming to do is release endorphins (the happiness hormones) and reduce cortisol (the stress hormone.)

6. F.L.O.W can be a useful way to remember some of these strategies.

F = Focus. Get into the present moment. What is this really all about? Are you bringing to this situation bad memories or anger with someone else? Are you bringing a bad mood because you are tired or upset about something completely different?

F = Feet. Good place to send your attention if you find your anger continuing to rise!

L = Listen. What is being said? Is it really as bad as all that? Is there any part of it to which you could say, 'Yes, you're right – that's fair cop.' This can really diffuse things.

O = Objective or Outside. Can you, in your imagination, step outside your mind and body and look at this objectively? Imagine yourself looking down on this situation. If you were God, what would you tell yourself to do? If you were your best friend, what advice would you give yourself?

W = Wait or Walk away. Give yourself some time here. You don't have to react immediately. You can say nothing at all. You can say something like, 'I don't think this is helping. I'd like to talk about this later when we've both calmed down.' Or you can just walk away, though it's polite to explain!

7. Mindfulness Meditation is also very useful. Many of the strategies described above are very mindful and you may find that they are all you need. If, however, you feel you need some more thorough guidance on Mindfulness Meditation, please get in touch with us in the counselling department.

It's a case of finding what works for you. It can take a lot of perseverance but it's worth it in the long run. Uncontrolled anger and even extreme irritation can ruin lives – BUT we are here in school to help you.

Meg Harper, Head of Counselling

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