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Choosing calmer waters

In the second of two articles on anger management, **Patrick O'Brien** looks at how to stop anger getting the better of you. Identifying your triggers can help you avoid the storm altogether

There is no doubt that the best way to manage anger is not to get angry at all. However, realities dictate that we might get caught off guard from time to time, and therefore we need a more resourceful approach to handling our emotions, rather than letting them control us.

Back in the 90s, Daniel Goleman first introduced us to the concept of emotional intelligence. Central to this notion was the need for a person to have self-awareness, as well as the ability for self-management.

It's a concept that maps well into the field of anger management: the best way to self-manage is to be aware of the presence of rising emotions and to decide to do something before those emotions boil over.

In his recent book *Clutch: Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Others Don't*, Paul Sullivan touches on a related subject. He looks at pressure, and how some people handle it much better than others. He considers why it is possible for some people to perform well under intense pressure, whereas others buckle and fall by the wayside.

One key factor is a person's ability to 'be present', remaining in touch with reality while making decisions, rather than being clouded by past events.

Looking at our ability to develop and maintain this mindful state then, to be in the present, aware of our surroundings and how they impact on our feelings, is a good place to start.

Here is a three-pronged approach to strengthen your ability to manage anger as it arises:

- * Increase your awareness of events that trigger stress and negative emotion.
- * Use a coping strategy when you find emotions have boiled over.
- * Reflect and learn from the anger once it has passed.

Trigger awareness

'Forewarned is forearmed' they say, so increasing awareness allows you to deal with stresses before they impact your performance. It's an approach that reduces the chance you'll need to react to emotions, once they boil over.

Each of us reacts to stress in different ways. Some of us relish the challenge of tight deadlines, whereas others buckle under this strain, fearful of failure.

A great starting point in the self-awareness journey is for you to think about your personality.

Are you a controlling, ambitious and competitive 'type A' person? Or, do you have a relaxed, sociable, and controlled 'type B' personality?

Next, think about specific situations that get your emotional juices flowing, especially those areas that add stress to your day. Start by making a list of those things you do at work.

Identifying aspects that always get your hackles rising affords you opportunities to consider change. Think about whether you can do less of them, or manage them in better ways, for example:

- * **Conflicting demands** – multitasking can aid productivity in routine work, yet often it is unproductive. It's not always possible to achieve everything, so it is important to clarify priorities and sequence important tasks.
- * **Too much work** – stretching the day by taking work home at night and on weekends can lead to burnout. Handling emails, texts and work-related calls in your personal time can be an early sign.
- * **Too little work** – repetitive and routine work may result in high physical, but low mental, demands. Boredom can result in lower productivity and increased staff

churn, especially among those in the Generation X and Y age groups.

- * **Lack of participation** – people like involvement in decisions that affect them, but automation often takes decision-making involvement away, which can leave a debilitating sense of helplessness.
- * **Presence of ambiguity** – people prefer certainty. A little ambiguity is fine, as it fuels curiosity, and resolution can raise confidence levels. Clarity, consistency and regularity in communication helps to reduce ambiguity.
- * **Equity and fairness** – pride in a job well done is important, and despite our humility, being respected feels good. We feel threatened and stressed when we are ignored, treated unfairly, not rewarded, or given lower status.
- * **Social connections** – social interaction is important. While texts and email can be great productivity tools, it is better to balance communications with face-to-face contact.

Being present means bringing awareness to things that concern you.

This reduces stress by allowing proactive management of those concerns in more rational and productive ways.

Stop seeing red

Psychologists say that the window of opportunity within which we can manage our anger is very small. Rapid intervention is therefore required, as options quickly become limited.

You've only a couple of seconds to intervene and manage the situation, so you need to be mindfully aware of the onset of any anger. To put you back in control, as soon as you feel your emotions bubbling up, use the five-step coping strategy as follows:



FOR THE FIRST ARTICLE IN THE SERIES, SEE THE MARCH ISSUE



- * **Awareness** – maintain awareness to sense emotions starting to boil over. Be aware you have the power to turn down the heat, just as you have for a simmering pan.
- * **Breathe** – focus attention on your breathing. Breathe in slowly, feel the air going down to the lungs, hear the sound it makes, purse your lips, blow out through the mouth making a ‘phew’ sound.
- * **Count** – count each breath. Maintain deliberate breathing for five cycles. Breathing is calming, and gives you the time to turn down that heat.
- * **Detach** – focusing on breathing allows you to take a physical and mental step back. Look at the situation through the eyes of the other person. Clarify your concerns, and rather than give in to anger, think about the outcomes you’d prefer to realise instead.
- * **Engage** – as you begin to feel calmer, more relaxed, detached, and clear of your intentions, you know you’ve used the time effectively to position yourself to re-engage with the other party positively.

Learning by reflection

Not every intervention will be successful, especially in the early days, so learning is best viewed as a process, rather than an outcome.

You will find that the more you choose to perform the above steps, the more skilled you will become in managing stress and anger.

Importantly, reflection after each intervention will increase your skill and confidence levels, as you consider key areas such as:

- * **Outcome** – how well did you do in managing that stressful situation?
- * **Ease of use** – in what ways are you finding it easier to use these techniques?

- * **Importance** – how important was the situation and was there much riding on it?
- * **Impact** – in what ways did your performance impact the situation you found yourself in?
- * **Context** – how did the situation, the other person, or yourself, limit outcomes achieved?
- * **Confidence** – how confident are you becoming about benefits in using the techniques?
- * **Discovery** – what things did you

learn that will allow you to make changes in your life?
 In closing, managing anger not only applies to yourself, but also to the people who you interact with on a daily basis. As your confidence rises, you will see how taking a more emotionally intelligent approach to your own life can not only result in less stress for yourself, but others too.

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