**Anger** Management (adapted from “Ask Alice,” Columbia University)

Anger is a natural human emotion, and feeling angry sometimes is normal. However, while it is completely acceptable to feel angry, destroying things as a result of that anger is not acceptable or healthy. Once you notice yourself feeling anger, you can choose how to manage it in a variety of controlled, and even productive, ways. Here are some suggestions:

**Express your anger**

Expressing your anger can take different forms depending on if your anger involves another person, or if it is in response to a problem you encounter alone. When you become angry at another person, the key to expressing your anger healthfully is to do so assertively but not aggressively. Being assertive means being able to express your needs or wants, while still being respectful of others and their needs or wants. It is different from being aggressive, which can mean being pushy, demanding, or even physically threatening. To express your anger to another person, try using "I" statements, such as "I'm feeling angry because…."

If you are alone, and get angry because your computer shuts down in the middle of a long paper or you get a bill you weren't expecting, you can express your anger verbally instead of physically. Yelling at your computer won't hurt anyone's feelings, but smashing the keyboard will (maybe not its feelings, but certainly its functioning).

**Sublimate your anger**

The goal in sublimating your anger is to change that angry energy into something productive. For example, if you get frustrated while trying to figure out a difficult math problem, you can use the energy from your anger to redouble your efforts by focusing more carefully.

Sublimating your anger is different from suppressing your anger. Suppressing your anger involves denying it and not acknowledging your feelings. Suppressed anger can turn inwards, leaving you unhappy, passive-aggressive, or even physically unwell. It is much more powerful and productive to use your anger in constructive behavior, such as problem solving.

**Calm your anger**

You can learn to calm yourself when you feel angry. Numerous workshops, seminars, books, articles in magazines, and even friends have strategies that work for them. Calming down affects external behavior and internal feelings, as well as controlling those physiological responses your body produces when you feel angry, such as increased heart rate and blood pressure.

One effective way to calm yourself is to practice deep breathing, taking deep breaths with your diaphragm and stomach. While it sounds simple, the effect of calm, correct breathing can be quite substantial. Rhythmic, slow breaths will slow your heart rate and relax your tensed muscles.

Relaxing imagery or words can help you calm down. You can use a memory of an actual relaxing scene where you have been, or a place created by your imagination. You might also want to try using yoga or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) technique to de-stress your tensed-up muscles.

**Work out your anger**

Sometimes physical exertion can help clear your head of anger, or at least get you to a state where one of the strategies listed above seems manageable. You can try engaging in somewhat strenuous physical activity, such as running, using a rowing machine, or even taking a brisk walk, to move through any feelings of rage. While you're up and moving, use the time to think through some questions, including: Why am I so angry about this? Am I angry with myself, another person, or a situation? Could my anger be related to stress? If I am angry at a person, can I try to see the situation from their perspective? Let your mind wander through your feelings until you are able to harness your anger and express those feelings appropriately.

It's important to prevent your anger from getting out of control. For example, if a hectic schedule and numerous demands from family, friends, and/or your professional life cause you to get angry, make sure to find time for relaxing and focusing on yourself. Sometimes you can change your expectations of situations and people in your life to help "redefine" your anger. Learning to manage anger can be challenging and is certainly a worthy reason to seek the assistance of a professional, like a therapist or counselor. If you're a student at Washington & Lee University, you can speak with someone in University Counseling; call 540-458-8590.

To help you in those cases where the anger isn't avoidable, you can focus on reacting less impulsively. Anger often leads people to react impulsively in ways that they end up regretting later. It's helpful to stop and remind yourself that getting angry won't fix whatever it is that made you angry and it won't make you feel better; in fact, it will make you feel worse. Stopping for a moment by counting to ten or taking yourself out of the situation even temporarily can be a big help in calming down. For example, when you feel like destroying something, count to ten and take a moment to realize that breaking that dish, or banging a hole in the wall, isn't going to leave you any closer to solving whatever made you angry. In fact, it'll leave you with a broken dish to clean up or a wall to repair.

If you stop yourself and breathe, soothe yourself with one of these or other strategies, focus on problem solving and what steps you can take, or just evaluate more rationally the situation that made you angry in the first place, your energy is much better spent.

**When should I see someone about my anger?**

You should consider seeing someone in University Counseling if difficulty managing your anger has caused problems in your life, or has been contributing to you feeling bad. This might be the case if:

* You have a tendency to throw things, break things, or otherwise damage property when angry.
* Your anger is causing difficulty in your relationships, such as might be the case if you say things you don’t mean or that are hurtful to others.
* You have trouble coping with normal day to day frustration.
* You tend to turn to alcohol or substances to cope with your anger, which can make things worse.
* Your anger is associated with a persistently negative mood. Some people who become depressed experience a significant increase in irritability and emotional reactivity, and addressing the depression also helps with anger.

Remember that even if your difficulties with anger have been serious, you can develop effective strategies to manage it and keep it from causing problems for you. Working with an individual therapist, you can learn to recognize triggers for anger, know your own body’s response to anger, develop new ways of thinking about anger-provoking situations, and learn a range of things you can do to keep your anger in control. To make an appointment with one of the therapists in University Counseling, call 540-458-8590, or email [jdowney@wlu.edu](mailto:jdowney@wlu.edu).