Learning to control your anger

You may have very good reasons to feel angry. You may be angry with yourself or others because of the circumstances of your injury, or frustrated by your physical limitations or the slow pace of your recovery. If you have had a head injury, this can make it more likely you will get angry and harder to control your anger.

Even if there is a good reason for you to get angry, it can get you into trouble, make it harder for you to do what you need to do, and damage your relationships.

**What is anger?**
- You might feel irritable, on edge, or in a blind rage.
- You might think the worst of people, or life in general, or your mind might go blank.
- Your heart and your head might pound and your muscles tense.
- You might snap at people, shout, argue, say nasty things, slam doors or hit out.

**Some myths about anger**

*If I do not stand up for myself, people will walk all over me*
You can learn to stand up for yourself calmly and clearly.

*If I don’t let my anger out, I will explode.*
*There’s nothing I can do to stop myself losing it once I get angry.*
*I’m an angry person. I can’t change who I am.*
There are many ways of dealing with anger and coping with difficult situations calmly. They do take time and practice, but anyone can learn them. You can also learn to reduce your stress levels, so you are less likely to get angry in the first place.

**How can I learn to control my anger?**

*Notice when you start to get angry*
Once you are really caught up in your anger, it is hard to think straight. It may feel like your anger comes out of the blue, but usually it is possible to look back and see how it built up over time. Thoughts might have gone round and round your mind, making you more and more wound up. You can learn to spot warning signs, like your shoulders tensing up, or your head pounding. The sooner you spot your anger rising, the better the chances are that you can do something about it.
**Know your triggers**
Your anger may be triggered by particular situations, perhaps because they remind you of painful experiences in the past. It might also be triggered by things like feeling tired. Once you know your triggers, you can use some of the other ideas on this list to help you stay calm.

**Pause and take a deep breath**
Breathe slowly, deeply and gently. This will help your body to relax.

**Go for a walk**
Take a break from the situation for five minutes or so. Walking can reduce physical tension. It is best of all if you can get out into fresh air.

**Gently remind yourself that getting angry won’t help the situation**
Try silently saying to yourself *Getting angry won’t help this situation. It hasn’t helped me in the past.*

**Tackling the issue which has made you angry**
What can you do to address this problem? Think of as many options as you can and try the one that seems best. It may help to talk it over with someone you trust.

**Take care of yourself**
Eat as healthily as you can, get some rest, try to keep your bedtimes regular and be careful with how much alcohol you drink.

**Thoughts are important**
- Do you sometimes jump to conclusions? Try asking yourself *Am I taking this too personally? Could there be another reason for what this person is doing?*
- Are you thinking the worst? Could there be a more balanced way of looking at the situation?
- Are you thinking that someone *should* be doing something or things *should* be different? Often, this is not helpful.
- Are your thoughts going round in circles? Leaving the situation and going for a walk might help.
Learn to communicate calmly and clearly
Speak up about problems and ask for what you need, calmly, clearly and respectfully. It might help to write down some notes, or to take a slow, deep breath before you start. Slow down, and listen to what the other person says, and ask them to explain if you are unsure what they mean. Calmly repeat what you have said, if you need to.

Getting started
Where will you get started with putting the advice in this leaflet into practice? Make a note and put it somewhere where you will see it.

Written by Dr Jane Hutton, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychological Medicine, King’s College Hospital, July 2012