

Anger and Trauma

National Center for PTSD

Anger is often a large part of a survivor's response to trauma. It is a core piece of the survival response in human beings. Anger helps us cope with life's stresses by giving us energy to keep going in the face of trouble. Yet anger can create major problems in the personal lives of those who have experienced trauma and those who suffer from trauma.

Why Is Anger a Common Response to Trauma?

High levels of anger are related to a natural survival instinct. When faced with extreme threat, people often respond with anger. Anger can help a person survive by shifting his or her focus. The person focuses all of his or her attention, thought, and action toward survival.

Anger is also a common response to events that seem unfair or in which you have been made a victim. Research shows that anger can be especially common if you have been betrayed by others. This may be most often seen in cases of trauma that involve exploitation or violence.

The trauma and shock of early childhood abuse often affects how well the survivor learns to control his or her emotions. Problems in this area lead to frequent outbursts of extreme emotions, including anger and rage.

How Can Anger After a Trauma Become a Problem?

Anger can create serious problems in the workplace and in family life. It can also affect your feelings about yourself and your role in society. It is known to lower self-esteem.

Often the best response to extreme threat is to act aggressively to protect yourself. Many trauma survivors, especially those who went through trauma at a young age, never learn any other way of handling threat. They tend to become stuck in their ways of reacting when they feel threatened. They may be impulsive, acting before they think.

Aggressive behaviors also include complaining, "backstabbing," being late or doing a poor job on purpose, self-blame, or even self-injury. Many trauma survivors only use aggressive responses to threat. They are not able to use other responses that could be more positive.

If you are a trauma survivor, you may not be aware of how your thoughts and beliefs have been affected by trauma. For instance, since the trauma you may feel a greater need to control your surroundings. This may lead you to act inflexibly toward others. Your actions then provoke others into becoming hostile towards you. Their hostile behavior then feeds into and reinforces your beliefs about others. For instance: "You can't trust anyone." From a survivor: "If I got out of control, it would be horrible, life-threatening, or could not be tolerated." "After all I've been through, I deserve to be treated better than this." "Others are out to get me," or "They won't protect me."

How Can You Get Help with Anger?

In anger management treatment, problems anger are all addressed in different ways. Cognitive-behavioral treatment (CBT), a commonly used therapy, uses many techniques to manage anger:

Taking a time out;

Writing thoughts down when angry;

Talking with someone instead of acting;

Changing the pattern "act first, think later" to "think first, act later";

It is important for trauma survivors who are angry to become more aware of their own thoughts leading up to becoming angry. They are then asked to come up with more positive thoughts to replace their negative, angry thoughts. For example, they may learn to say to themselves, "Even if I don't have control here, I won't be threatened in this situation."

Summary

There are many ways to help trauma survivors to deal with the high levels of anger they may feel. Treatment aims to help with all aspects of anger. One important goal of treatment is to improve your sense of flexibility and control. In this way, you do not have to feel as if you're going through trauma again each time you react to a trigger with explosive or excessive anger. Treatment may also have a positive impact on personal and work relationships.

Edited by Susan Peabody