How to... restrain your violent impulses
“I know I’ve got a problem with being violent. I feel so bad afterwards. It’s as if it didn’t really happen. She was nagging me the minute I came in, and I just wanted to relax after work. She didn’t know when to stop, so I started yelling that she should shut up. Next minute, I had hit her and she was crying. I didn’t even think I’d hurt her. I even thought she deserved it.”

“Sometimes my temper scares me. I can’t stop myself from getting into a rage. Afterward, I really regret it; I tremble and often feel sick in my stomach. People are afraid of me and I don’t want them to be. I need to sort this out, once and for all.”

Rage can cost you everything – family, friends, home, job and even freedom. This booklet looks at why men or women behave violently. It explains how people can learn to express their anger safely, and where to get help. It also offers advice to those who may be a target.

So I’ve got a bad temper. What does it matter?

You may be driving home after work, feeling tired, stressed and irritable. A bus or car cuts you up, or a learner driver stalls in front of you, and you explode. You just want them to get out of your way! You gesture at them furiously. You wind down your window, screaming out abuse. You blast your horn, flash your lights and deliberately tail the vehicle in question. By the time you get home, you’re seething, and lash out at your partner, the kids and the family dog. Afterwards, you may start apologising. Maybe you’ve done this before; maybe this is one time too many.
When anger gets out of control it turns into rage. This can be so fast – in a fraction of a second – that we explode before we know what’s happening to us. Inside us, there’s an immense surge of energy, and all we want to do is react. When we’re in this state, the thinking part of the brain is actually bypassed, so we say and do things we may later regret. We want to get those frustrations out, whatever the cost, in verbal abuse or physical violence towards other people or objects. As we hurl something across the room, or punch the wall, we may even end up hurting ourselves. But we’re out to prove a point and teach someone a lesson. We can’t seem to stop ourselves. Our rage is a powerful weapon that we may also use to scare other people and to make them do what we want.

This kind of response is similar to a temper tantrum in a child. We learn to be violent from a very early age, and it may then become a habitual way of instantly reacting to an event, without listening, hearing, understanding or thinking about what is going on.

Afterwards, we may feel guilty. We may try to make light of whatever happened, even denying that any violence took place, or we may convince ourselves it was justified. In other words, we feel very uncomfortable about taking responsibility for our actions. But our behaviour has consequences.

**Domestic violence**

It may be difficult to repair the bonds between you and those close to you, if they have been hurt and are living on their nerves, not knowing when you may explode next and what you may do. If you have children, they may become distanced from you in their fear. If you harm them, you risk losing them.
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Street violence
Anger, rage or violence is as unacceptable in a public place as it is in private, but can happen all too easily. Just think how quickly we react when someone jumps a queue! If two or more angry people are in conflict, it can quickly escalate. A lot is said, but very little is heard. Things become heated, and the next stage is rage and violence. If the opponents were to ask themselves, afterwards, what point was served, the answer would probably be none. But they may well end up in court or in prison.

Workplace problems
Being out of control in a working environment puts other people at risk, and compromises your own future. It could result in physical injury, or fatality, if dangerous machinery is in operation. If you are a manager and prone to anger and rage, it will do little to motivate others and may lose you the respect of your colleagues and staff. If you deal with the general public, it’s vital for success to be in control of your temper and anger.

Ill health
Stress and anger may affect your health, making you more prone to headaches, backache and stomach aches. It may contribute to the development of more serious medical conditions.

What causes these violent outbursts?
Anger is an emotion that can build and build inside us if we don’t have a release, rather like a pressure cooker that’s going to explode. It may have started as a different feeling, perhaps hurt or ongoing frustration, which built up into anger. The longer the build-up, the greater the pressure will be. If anger is not controlled and expressed in a safe way, it takes control of you.
Powerful emotions may be triggering your violent feelings. These may include feeling hurt or threatened, afraid and powerless. There may be a long-standing grievance or a sense of injustice (as a result of being disadvantaged in some way, or being stereotyped), which may easily be engaged.

Stress plays a big role. The more stressed we are, the more likely we are to lose our tempers and descend from anger into rage and violent behaviour. We can all recognise that when we are more relaxed, after a good holiday for instance, we are more tolerant of each other and of situations that arise. After a few days back at work, and struggling through the rush-hour traffic, this tolerance drains away. (See The Mind guide to managing stress. Details of this and other booklets mentioned can be found on p. 14.)

Drinking too much or abusing drugs only makes matters worse. It's well known that drink contributes to violent behaviour. It lowers our inhibitions, making it easier to hurt someone else. In a court of law, violent acts are not excusable because you were drunk.

**Why are some people more likely to get into a rage?**

Angry feelings can break out because of something happening to you here and now, but they may have their origins in the past. 'Present tense' anger is when you've become angry about something, but you express your anger, so it's over in just a few minutes. It's unlikely that you'll rage and get violent. So, when someone bumps into you and apologises, you feel briefly angry, but you accept that it was an accident and move on.
'Regressive' anger is anger that you've been carrying around with you for a long time. Often, it can be traced back to your childhood. You may have been beaten, abused or neglected. You may have had a violent father, and witnessed his violence. In your past, family, friends, teachers or someone from work may have done or said things to you that made you angry, and which still rankle. Because you are still carrying these feelings around with you, when something happens to annoy you, you feel extremely angry and explode. This response is likely to be out of all proportion, and you find it hard to let things be. You can't stop fighting, raging and arguing. You can't forgive and forget.

A blow-up like this will probably affect you for the rest of the day and may even continue for many days or weeks. If you hold onto resentment, it adds fuel to the flames and keeps your anger alive. If you are left with a lingering feeling of frustration, you may then create another opportunity to get into a rage and clear your pent up feelings.

What can I do about it?

You have a choice. You can choose to be violent, or you can choose to restrain your violent impulses. It's about taking personal responsibility for your actions. Even if you throw something violently, you can choose where to aim – at a person, or at a particular wall.

Identifying what is going on for you, and where your anger originates will mean you can do some emotional release work to clear it and move on. Understanding the way you express anger is a good starting point.
There are four main styles, which we all use, but we each tend to favour one style, in particular.

- The intimidator style is very confrontational and threatening, and aimed at dominating and controlling a situation. It easily turns to rage, and later violence, as the conflict worsens.
- The interrogator style is also confrontational, as we throw aggressive questions at the other person to unnerve them: 'What do you think you’re doing?'; 'Who do you think you are?'
- The passive-aggressive style is indirect rather than head-on. We use sarcasm and adopt the ‘poor-me’ approach to make people feel guilty: 'I’ve tried my hardest for you!', 'Whatever I do is no good!'
- The distancer style means we try to get away from situations we don’t like and anything we don’t want to hear. Alternatively, we may deny our angry feelings, altogether: 'Nothing’s the matter with me. I’m fine!' Buried feelings may eventually build into an explosion of rage and violence.

It’s important to recognise your ‘triggers’ – what it is that usually sets off your anger. If you think about it, there’s usually a lead up to feeling angry. Then something triggers it, and you ignite. You need to learn about your own particular pathway.

For example, you might become angry if you are wrongly blamed for something, and take it personally. First, you may feel confused, then annoyed, and then hurt. The next stage is anger, resentment, rage, and then perhaps violence, followed by guilt and shame. In this example, feeling hurt is the point before getting angry. Think about which words might apply to you, and plot your pathway. Other words might be: frustration, disappointment, impatience, bitterness and hatred. When you can identify the point just before you feel angry, it will help you to know where you are headed and what might happen if you don’t take control.
How can I control my anger?

The first objective is to try to nip any potential conflict in the bud by better communication – ‘clean’ communication. By communicating exactly how you feel, in a non-aggressive way, the other person will be able to listen to you. Being assertive means stating how you feel or what you need, without being antagonistic, and asking rather than demanding. You can be firm, without being threatening, and this brings good results and encourages a spirit of cooperation. Try using words like, ‘I feel angry with you because... ’ This clears the anger out of your system, without anyone getting hurt in the process and without you repressing it or bottling it up.

If something does set you off, take a deep breath and try and stall as long as possible before reacting (try counting numbers under your breath). The more time you can allow, the more you’ll calm down and be able to look at the situation more clearly. This also gives you the chance to think about how you need to play things. If you need space, then leave the potential conflict.

Many arguments happen because we are each convinced that our opinion is correct, and we have to prove it. Accepting that we all have our own opinions reduces the potential for a major argument.

There’s a tendency to stop breathing properly or listening to what the other person has to say. Deeper breathing has a calming effect on the body. Remember, there’s a lot of adrenalin rushing around preparing your body to fight. (See The Mind guide to relaxation, details under Further reading, on p. 14.)
If you find yourself getting really heated, take some time out. Go for a walk, play a game of some sort, or listen to music. Afterwards, go back and try to understand and work out the cause of your anger.

Remember:
• Nobody likes it when you rage, so calm down.
• Don’t shout. This is not communicating and it is unlikely you will be listened to.
• Don’t answer anger with anger. Take time out rather than throwing more fuel on the fire.
• Find a good listener. If you can share the reason why you are upset, then you may be able to calm down more easily.
• Think before you act. Consider the cause of your anger. Often anger is due to a misunderstanding, and it’s difficult to think straight when you’re upset. Try to find positive or neutral explanations for what the person did to provoke you.
• Keep reminding yourself that when you react and rage, you stop thinking and start doing and saying things you later regret.
• Delay your reaction, especially if you can’t keep the response rational. You must try, at all costs, to avoid responding to your anger physically.

What else can help me?

A more positive and healthy lifestyle, and access to good support when you need it, will help you achieve better self-control. Improvements might involve changing your diet, increasing your level of physical activity and exercise, and cutting down on drinking and smoking. Finding out about stress management techniques can also be very helpful. (For more information about all of these options, see Further reading, on p. 14.)
Releasing your feelings through talking, rather than acting them out, can be an important way out of the cycle of violence. This could mean talking to a friend, or joining a support group of people in a similar situation.

Talking treatments
You could also see a counsellor or psychotherapist who can help you explore the causes of your anger and pain further, and to work through them. These talking treatments can enable you to monitor and improve your own responses. Counselling tends to look at problems in the here and now, while psychotherapy tends to go deeper and further. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a particularly practical approach to dealing with your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, often in a limited number of sessions. For more information about talking treatments, see the Mind website, and Mind’s booklets on p. 14.

Anger management programmes
An anger management programme may be useful if you have had a one-off violent outburst, or used to be violent, but feel that you are able to control it. A typical course might include some one-to-one counselling or coaching, but would usually involve working in a group of up to ten people. You may find one-day courses, weekend courses or longer programmes lasting up to eight weeks. There are several approaches.

Psycho-educational courses typically use a workbook to teach people how to express their anger cleanly. The group provides support and opportunities for discussion. There is no formal therapy, but the results are therapeutic and transforming. You may be given homework to do.
Other courses are more therapeutic and 'experiential', with people exploring anger and other matters together, in groups or pairs, and providing each other with feedback. There may be other processes involved, including psychodrama for instance, to help participants deal with whatever arises. (See Useful organisations on p. 13.)

**Domestic violence programmes**
A domestic violence programme could be vital if you can't control your violent behaviour, and want to change this. The focus is usually on modifying people’s behaviour by getting them to take personal responsibility for their actions and to understand what impact it has on others. People have to be prepared to make a commitment to changing, and to cooperating with the programme's requirements. This could involve, for instance, making a concerted effort to cut down on your alcohol intake.

A course of this kind may last up to 18 months, during which time a plan of non-violence is developed, and you receive help and support. The programme might involve one-to-one sessions at first, followed by group work, and then, perhaps, further individual sessions afterwards. The group work may be therapy based, and the necessary support should be provided. It may well involve role-play and discussion.

**What should family members do?**
It can be hard to accept that there is violence and abuse in your life. Many victims of violence put up with their situation through fear, lack of self-esteem, and practical concerns about their home, their children and their future.
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But too many people wait too long before asking for help. Domestic violence is a crime. The violent person has the problem, and should recognise it. You could approach your GP about it. Alternatively, get in touch with one of the organisations and help lines listed opposite, which can give you support and guidance. They will understand and appreciate all your concerns, and may provide a temporary safe haven, in some cases.

Children can become scared and withdrawn, and may blame themselves for the violence they are exposed to. It may also be reflected in their own violent behaviour. They may benefit from talking to a child psychologist or to a therapist. If you have concerns about your children, your child’s school may be able to advise you, or you could talk to your GP about it. (See also, Useful organisations, opposite.) There may be occasions when the police or social services need to be involved.

References

Facing the fire J. Lee (Bantam Books 1993)
Getting over getting mad J. Ford (Publishers Group West 2001)
Growing yourself back up J. Lee (Three Rivers Press 2001)
Resolving conflict with others and within yourself G. Graham Scott (Airlift Book Company Ltd 1990)
Tongue fu! How to deflect, disarm and defuse any verbal conflict S. Horn (St Martin’s Griffin 1996)
The verbally abusive relationship: how to recognize it and how to respond P. Evans (Adams Media Corporation 1996)
We have to talk: healing dialogues between women and men S. Shem, J. Surrey (Basic Books 1998)
Useful organisations

Mind
Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163.

AVP Britain (Alternatives to Violence Project)
tel. 020 7324 4757, web: www.avpbritain.org.uk
National workshops on resolving conflict. See website for regional offices

BAAM (British Association of Anger Management)
tel. 0845 1300 286, web: www.angermanage.co.uk
Support and training for men, women and children needing anger management and those who have to deal with someone else’s anger

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
tel. 0870 443 5252  web: www.bacp.co.uk
See website for details of local practitioners

Refuge
tel. 0808 200 0247, web: www.refuge.org.uk
24-hour freephone domestic violence helpline and refuges

Supportline
PO Box 1596, Ilford, Essex 1G1 3FW
tel. 020 8554 9004, web: www.supportline.org.uk
Emotional support for men, women and children faced with domestic violence
Further reading

- Conquering fear D. Rowe (Mind 2003) £1
- How to assert yourself (Mind 2006) £1
- How to deal with anger (Mind 2006) £1
- How to deal with bullying at work (Mind 2004) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing (Mind 2006) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem (Mind 2006) £1
- How to look after yourself (Mind 2006) £1
- Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of counselling (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (Mind 2004) £3.50
- The Mind guide to managing stress (Mind 2005) £1
- The Mind guide to massage (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding anxiety (Mind 2005) £1
- Understanding childhood distress (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding depression (Mind 2006) £1
- Understanding psychotic experiences (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding schizophrenia (Mind 2005) £1
- Understanding talking treatment (Mind 2005) £1
- Understanding the psychological effects of street drugs (Mind 2004) £1
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• The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.

• Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.

• We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.

• We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind’s helpline, MindinfoLine: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, MindinfoLine has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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