

# **Anger is a flow of emotion like water through a hose. It helps to know when to turn it up or down and how to direct it**

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Pretty much everyone will sometimes struggle with anger at work. People fear the wrath of abusive supervisors, suppress anger to maintain

a façade of professionalism, or vent anger toward co-workers who are, fairly or not, targets. Reactions to anger in the workplace can be strong, but they're not always effective.

As scholars who also fall prey to the pitfalls of [anger](#) ourselves, [we are fascinated by anger](#). We have studied the causes, underlying processes and consequences of anger from the perspectives of [management](#), [psychology](#), [marketing](#) and [negotiations](#).

We [recently reviewed](#) more than 400 research articles across psychology, business and related fields on topics ranging from brain activity to negotiation to race relations. Yet despite the ubiquity of anger in the workplace and the decades of anger research that exists across a number of fields, we found no straightforward way to understand the complexity of the life cycle of anger and how to manage it most effectively.

As we dived more deeply into the research literature, though, we realized that simply reframing how we think about anger could provide a novel, flexible framework for how to deal with this emotion in daily life. Our suggestion: Think of anger as a flow of emotion, like water through a garden hose.

By thinking of the flow of anger, you can unpack its key dimensions: its path and strength. Understanding whether the hose is pointed effectively and whether the strength of the stream is appropriate are critical for knowing when, how and why to focus or redirect the anger and amplify or weaken its intensity.

## **The direction of anger**

Imagine a co-worker charges into your office, yelling, breathing heavily, face reddened, veins bulging. Even if you are simply an unsuspecting colleague who happened to have your door open, your attention is

undoubtedly now fixed on your co-worker.

Are you the target of their anger for something you did, or merely an observer of their anger at someone else?

If you are an undeserving target, do you try to reframe the issue so that the angry person will realize the anger is better directed elsewhere?

If you are the observer, you also have a choice about whether to ignore your co-worker's anger or help them redirect it to a more effective outlet. You might simply listen empathetically while they let off steam, perhaps pointing out the relative risks and benefits of their taking their complaints to the supervisor.

You are deciding, in effect, what suggestions to make about the direction of this person's anger.

The key to effectively managing the direction of anger is to manage the attention of those in the room. Reshaping how angry people attribute blame, for example, can help people [take another person's perspective](#) or [understand the situation in a new way](#), directing the flow more productively.

## **The intensity of anger**

When an angry co-worker approaches you as the target, do you ignore the signal or offer to work with the person so a similar situation doesn't happen in the future? Both are ways to tamp down the intensity of the emotion coming at you.

When you are angry, do you try to [distract yourself](#) from the anger, let it [simmer](#), or [embrace](#) it? You are essentially deciding how you want to manage the intensity of your own angry feelings.

It is important to recognize that managing the intensity of anger can go in [both directions](#). Sometimes high-intensity anger should be [turned down](#) and sometimes subtle anger [should be amplified](#).

For example, consider an instance in which you feel anger at what you perceive to be an unfair change to a company policy. In this case, simply going for a walk outside to avoid expressing your frustration may result in the leadership not realizing that you and others on the team feel this way, leaving little opportunity to discuss and update the policy to more reasonable standards.

Learning to [self-regulate your thoughts and behaviors](#) can help you manage the intensity of any anger you find yourself feeling. Rather than impulsively reacting, you can practice [handling your emotions](#) so you control whether you crank up your expressed anger or dial it down. Part of this process is thinking carefully about the [cost-benefit trade-offs](#) of expressing your anger. In these ways, you more effectively manage the strength of the flow without unnecessarily just turning it off.

## **Controlling anger**

Knowing when, how and why to shape the direction and intensity of anger is no small feat. Some of this decision is rightly based on the situation. For example, is it safe to step in? Do you feel [personally skilled at intervening](#)?

But it is within everyone's power to learn how to [manage their own and others' anger](#) more effectively.

To do so, you need to understand your role and whether the flow is a one-time situation or a persistent problem. Understanding whether you're holding the hose, standing in its path or observing from a distance is the first step to effectively managing the direction and intensity of the flow.

Second is deciding whether and how to intervene: Can you reframe the initial trigger so that the faucet is never turned on, or turned on more or less powerfully? If anger is already too strong and you cannot or do not want to avoid it, can you help the angry person regulate the direction and intensity of their anger to overcome the issue in some way?

You can get better at controlling the flow of anger in ways that [can improve](#) rather than [harm relationships and outcomes](#). Research supports working on your [emotional intelligence](#) and building belief in your own capability to handle anger. Manage factors that tend to wrest control of the hose away from you, including becoming defensive, feeling shame or even suffering from a lack of sleep.

Taking these steps and practicing controlling the hose's path and [intensity](#) can help address problems in the short term and prevent anger from becoming a [destructive pattern](#) in the long term.

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