When Does Anger Become a Problem?

Anger becomes a problem when it is felt too intensely, is felt too frequently, or is expressed inappropriately. Feeling anger too intensely or frequently places extreme physical strain on the body. During prolonged and repeated episodes of anger, certain divisions of the nervous system become highly activated. Consequently, blood pressure and heart rate increase and stay elevated for long periods. This stress on the body may produce many different health problems, such as hypertension, heart disease, and diminished immune system efficiency. Thus, from a health standpoint, avoiding physical illness is a motivation for controlling anger.

Another compelling reason to control anger concerns the negative consequences that result from expressing anger inappropriately. In the extreme, anger may lead to violence or physical aggression, which can result in numerous adverse effects, such as being arrested or jailed, being physically injured, being retaliated against, losing loved ones, being terminated from a substance abuse treatment or social service program, or feeling guilt, shame, or regret.

Even when anger does not lead to violence, the inappropriate expression of anger, such as verbal abuse or intimidating or threatening behaviour, often results in negative consequences. For example, it is likely that others will develop fear, resentment, and lack of trust toward those who subject others to angry outbursts, which may cause alienation from individuals, such as family members, friends, and co-workers.

The inappropriate expression of anger initially has many apparent payoffs. One payoff is being able to manipulate and control others through aggressive and intimidating behaviour; others may comply with a person’s demands because they fear verbal threats or violence. Another payoff is the release of tension that occurs when one loses his or her temper and acts aggressively.

Although the individual may feel better after an angry outburst, everyone else may feel worse. In the long term, these initial payoffs lead to concerning long term issues. For this reason they are called “apparent” payoffs because the long-term negative consequences far outweigh the short-term gains. For example, consider a father who persuades his children to comply with his demands by using an angry tone of voice and threatening gestures. These behaviours imply to the children that they will receive physical harm if they are not obedient. The immediate payoff for the father is that the children obey his commands. The long-term consequence, however, may be that the children learn to fear or dislike him and become emotionally detached from him. As they grow older, they may avoid contact with him or refuse to see him altogether.