

# This Is as Dangerous to Your Heart as Smoking

Anger. It's an emotion we all feel from time to time. Like stress or fear, anger—at work, home or on the road—is a common experience of modern-day life. But how you manage it could determine how susceptible you are to heart disease and other health problems.

So says Joseph Shrand, M.D., a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist and author whose latest book *Outsmarting Anger: 7 Strategies for Defusing Our Most Dangerous Emotion*—argues that managing anger may be as important to your heart health as giving up tobacco, eating a healthy diet and getting regular exercise. In an interview on Newsmax TV's *Meet The Doctors*, Dr. Shrand unpacks what he describes as an “emotional survival kit” he's developed for doing so.

“[Anger] is normal in everyone, it is a survival emotion,” says Dr. Shrand, a former child actor on the Boston-based PBS kids' television program *Zoom*. “Anger is the fight branch of fight-flight. So we get angry when we think somebody is imposing on us. Anger, if you really think about it, is an emotion designed to change the behavior of somebody else. We get angry when we want somebody to do something different—[to] start doing something or stop doing something.”

Many medical studies have found people who shout, yell and rage are more likely to suffer heart problems than those who can stay calm when angry. Scientists don't know exactly why, but anger and hostility activate the so-called “fight or flight response.” That, in turn, boosts levels of stress hormones—including adrenaline and cortisol—that speed up your heart rate and increase your blood pressure.

A recent analysis of 44 studies published in the *Journal of*

*the American College of Cardiology* found, for instance, that people who have a hard time controlling their anger are more likely to have heart problems than those who manage their emotions in healthier ways. The researchers also found anger does more harm to men's hearts than women's.

Dr. Shrand says the keys to defusing our most dangerous emotion are recognizing why we are angry, maintaining calm and working toward a solution to the problem that has provoked it. He has developed a seven-step method for doing so:

**No. 1: Recognize rage.** The first step in defusing anger is to recognize it for what it is—turning your emotions into intellectual thoughts in the process. “Recognition is a thinking function, where anger is a feeling,” Dr. Shrand notes. “As soon as you begin to recognize you’re angry you are more in control of it. And when you recognize it you realize I want to see something different.”

**No. 2: Determine why you’re angry.** Are you envious or suspicious of another person? Understanding what has provoked your anger can help you defuse it. “We get envious if we think somebody has something more than us; we get suspicious if we think they’re trying to take something from us,” he explains.

**No. 3: See anger as a result of a threat.** Knowing this can help neutralize your anger because you understand its origins, Dr. Shrand says.

**No. 4: Project peace.** Try to stay calm when you feel rage building, and don’t allow yourself to be pulled into arguments or shouting matches.

**No. 5: Engage empathy.** If another person’s words or actions have provoked your anger, try to understand that individual’s perspective, even if you don’t agree with it. “Human beings want to feel valued by other human beings and empathy is [about] sending a message—I’m interested in you,” he says.

**No. 6: Acknowledge differences.** Accepting that another person's perspective is different from yours is not the same thing as agreeing with the other person, but doing so can help you manage anger over disagreements. "Communicate clearly, say, 'Look I can see you're angry ... I'm interested in why you are angry,'" he explains.

**No. 7: Trade thanks.** Resolving interpersonal conflicts that spark anger can be as simple as saying thank you. "Think about this: 90 percent of the time in our culture when somebody says thank you, the other person says you're welcome," he says. "Now that's interesting, that means I don't see you as a threat, I'm not envious, I'm not suspicious."

"You've projected peace, you've engaged empathy, you've communicated, you've traded thanks—these are the seven steps."

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