

Anger in the balance

*Whether you have too much or too little,
your anger could be threatening your health*

Men aren't very good at emotions. That's a given. Some of us just don't express any at all. Others make room for one exception: anger. Since all our emotional eggs are in one anger basket, when something sets us off, we really blow. Paradoxically, both of these extremes—expressing too much or too little anger—can set you up for some pretty serious health problems.

Too little anger may seem like a blessing, but it causes problems when it's a denial of feelings that are actually there. "Because of the way they were reared as boys, most men have difficulty looking inside, seeing their emotions, and putting them into words," says Ronald Levant, Ed.D., of Cambridge Hospital in Massachusetts. This is clearly true for the nice guy who smiles in the face of an insult. Deep down, he's got to feel some anger, but all emotions are pushed down so deep, he doesn't even feel it—much less express it. We'll call him the "swallower" because when an emotion like anger rises up, he swallows it down.

Unlike swallows, some of us feel too much anger. "For many men, feelings of hurt and vulnerability end up going through an emotional fun-

nel system and coming out as anger," says Dr. Levant. With one emotion carrying so much weight, some men find themselves getting angry all the time. "Men are more hostile than women," explains Redford Williams, M.D., author of *Anger Kills*.

Hostility, a blend of aggressiveness, anger and cynicism, has recently replaced the idea of "Type A" as the personality type that puts you at greatest risk of heart disease. And the cynical aspect is really what's new. If you're cynical, you take a dim view of other people and have a hard time trusting them. "If you can't trust other people, the only person you can trust is yourself. So you always have to be in control," explains Dr. Williams. "When you're not, eventually you will feel rage."

Some hostile men—we'll call them "blasters"—will just start yelling and honking if, for example, they're caught in a traffic jam. Others will feel the rage, but bottle it up inside. This type of hostile man might be called the "seether."

One thing the swallower, the blaster and the seether all have in common: They need to learn a few simple strategies for expressing their anger in healthier ways.

BODY OF EVIDENCE

"We have looked at a lot of different emotional and personality factors and have found that the only variable that reliably predicts how often people get sick is the way they handle their anger," says Mara Julius, Sc.D., at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. Here's a rundown of the specific health damage the different styles of handling anger may cause:

➤ **High blood pressure.** If hostile men, blasters and seethers, have a problem trusting, what happens in their bodies when they're *made* to trust? To test this question, researchers at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City gathered 60 male college students and had them describe a very personal, troubling event to a student they didn't know. Researchers found that the hostile men's blood pressure soared twice as high over their resting rate. The men who weren't hostile experienced only a slight increase in blood pressure.

➤ **Clogged arteries.** Research just released establishes a link between aggressive anger, blaster anger, and hardening of the arteries, arteriosclerosis. In a recent Japanese study, 34 people took a personality test before having their arteries examined for signs of the build-up of plaque that hardens the arteries. Those subjects who had a higher tendency to direct a lot of anger outward also had significantly more plaque in their arteries and so were at higher risk of suffering from a stroke or a heart attack.

➤ **Weakened hearts.** Research out of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences studied patients with established coronary artery disease. They looked at oxygen delivery to the heart during exercise, a significant predictor of developing coronary artery disease. They found that the more hostile men, the blasters and seethers, had less oxygen reaching their heart and so a greater risk of developing coronary artery disease later in life.

LOOK FAMILIAR?



What kind of angry are you?

The following questions will help you identify your style of handling anger. Answer yes or no as spontaneously as you can.

1. I get angry when I'm slowed down by the mistakes of others.
2. When I feel myself getting too emotional I try to compose myself as quickly as possible.
3. I think most people would lie to get ahead.
4. I would not describe myself as assertive.
5. I get my guard up when people are more friendly than I expected.
6. Often I can't understand why I have been so irritable and grouchy.
7. At times I feel like picking a fist fight with someone.
8. I believe it is important to be positive at all times.
9. I have sometimes had to be rough with people who were rude.
10. I don't know how to respond when people ask about my feelings.
11. When I really lose my temper I am capable of hitting someone.

If you answered yes to three or more of the odd-numbered items, you may have a hostile side to your personality. If your yes answers cluster toward the top of the self-test, you're more likely to be a seether and hold in your hostile feelings. If you had more yes answers toward the end of the list, you may be a blaster and may vent your anger in an aggressive way by yelling and using physical force.

If you answered yes to three or more of the even-numbered items, you're more likely to be a swallower and avoid expressing angry feelings. You may have a cool rational approach to life, or ignore your angry feelings to keep others happy.

If you answered yes to fewer than three even items and three odd items, you probably communicate your angry feelings clearly and calmly after reflecting on the problem that triggered the angry feelings in the first place. This is a healthy, reflective style of handling anger.

► **Cancer.** Here's where the anger swallows get into trouble. There is growing evidence that the kind of chronic walling-off of emotion that many men engage in weakens the body's immune system. In a recent book on behavioral links to cancer and health, Lydia Temoshok, Ph.D., and Henry Dreher outline a large number of studies linking anger swallowing with chemical alterations in the body, such as reduced number and activity of immune defender cells and with outcomes such as faster cancer growth and earlier recurrence of cancer.

8 STEPS TO HEALTHIER ANGER

Healthy anger is what the experts call "reflective anger": You feel the emotion, you step back and consider the source, and then you make a reasoned decision about how to express it. All three elements—feeling, thinking, expressing—are crucial. Here are some guidelines for developing a healthier approach to your anger.

✓ **Become more aware.** Identify what your experience of anger is like. Consider how and where in your body you experience anger—do you clench your teeth? Do you tense your lower back? Work on relaxing those muscle groups.

✓ **Use reason.** If you feel you're about to blow up, slow down. Take yourself out of the situation and think about it logically. If you realize that your anger is unjustified or that you have no effective options for changing the situation, try to talk yourself down from being angry.

✓ **Know your history.** Think back to situations in the past that made you angry. Are you bringing back "old" anger because, for example, your wife sounds like your mother? By knowing your anger triggers, you'll be able to identify situations where you're overreacting and ask for help in handling the anger rather than blaming the wrong person.

✓ **Suspend judgment.** Don't judge the emotion: You're not a

"bad" person for feeling... just may not be in a situation where you should act on that feeling.

✓ **Develop an inner dialogue.** Explore possibilities for expressing your anger by mentally rehearsing possible situations, interactions and outcomes. For example, before confronting your brother about not paying back the money he owes you, consider what will happen if you call him a rotten SOB and demand the money that afternoon. What will he do? Will he yell back? Will you get the money back?

✓ **Learn to listen.** Once you decide to act and formulate a strategy, enter the situation with a commitment to listen. Allow your partner to say everything on his/her mind without interrupting.

✓ **Reflect back.** Repeat back what you just heard. If your wife tells you that she's scared by the way you drive, first hear her out, then start your response by saying, "I hear you saying that you're frightened by my driving." It may save you a hurtful misunderstanding. For example, if you responded, "I hear you saying that I can't do anything right," you give her a chance to correct and reassure you: "No, I think you do lots of things right—it's just that your driving frightens me."

✓ **Describe your point of view simply.** When you start to talk about what you're feeling, give a nonjudgmental description of what's going on. Try to use "I" in the statement: Instead of "you make me so frustrated," try "I feel frustrated...." It sounds elementary, but by taking responsibility for your feelings, you sound less attacking. Make clear statements about how you feel and what you want from others.

Anger can be a constructive, energizing force in your life. It can sharpen your vision of what you want and who you are. By learning to express anger in a more balanced way, not only will you feel better, but your body will work better, too.