





WHAT'S UP WITH ALL THIS ANGER?

by Sharon Saline, PsyD

Here's how you can reduce your frustration, manage intense feelings, and live with more contentment.

YOU KNOW THE MOMENT. The moment when something goes wrong or someone says a few words that set you off. A switch has flipped and suddenly there's a bubbling volcano of angry, negative emotions inside of you waiting to erupt. Within seconds, before you know what's happening, you say or do things that you'll surely regret later but can't stop. Everybody struggles with these moments. For folks living with ADHD, though, they seem to occur more often and more intensely than for people with neurotypical brains. It can be a frustrating and often shameful way to live, with relationships or work negatively affected. Why does this happen to people with ADHD and what can you do differently to create calmer, happier lives?

Talking about anger and reactivity means understanding what Daniel Goleman calls the "amygdala hijack" and improving self-regulation. Inside the emotional center of our brains (the limbic system) lies the amygdala. It acts as the brain's alarm system, setting off the "flight or fight" response. When the amygdala senses danger, real or imagined, it jumps into action and tells the rest of the brain and the body to run from danger or fight it. That's when you feel a rush of adrenaline, a faster heartbeat, and shorter breathing—a knee-jerk reaction within milliseconds of sensing a disturbance.

Emotions, executive functions, and negative thinking

When the amygdala becomes activated, the thinking brain (your prefrontal cortex) goes temporarily offline and feelings rule the day. In neurotypical brains, executive functioning skills help the amygdala calm down by engaging language to name the feelings instead of experiencing them, to step back and assess the situation and find solutions. In ADHD brains, your executive functioning skills, already working so hard to accomplish and maintain daily life tasks, struggle with the extra burden of effectively dealing with a rush of strong emotions. You'll react quickly with volatility instead of responding with consideration.

Working memory also plays a huge part in managing feelings. We know that it functions as the RAM of your brain, holding one piece of information in your mind while you do different things (such as remembering a doctor's appointment long enough to write it down), recalling something from the past and applying it to the present or future (such as remembering that the last time you texted while driving you got a \$100 ticket), and remembering steps in a series of given directions (such as following a recipe). Research has linked working memory to controlling and expressing emotions. One study found that people with strong work-

ing memory are less reactive to events and more capable of assessing emotional situations than those with weaker working memory.*

When you consider that working memory is one of the executive functioning skills frequently impacted by ADHD, you can start to understand how you become flooded by big feelings so fast. In those moments, it's tough to overcome the effects of an amygdala hijack and recall choices that helped you in the past or those you want to avoid repeating.

Everything that happens in our lives involves emotional reactions. Whether a driver cuts in front of us or we get an unexpected raise at work, we experience internal signals that range from distressing to pleasant. That's part of being human. It's what we associate with the signals and the labels we attach to them that make things worse. You may regret that you lost it last night when your family didn't help clean up after dinner again and apologized for it. But, if you're like most people with ADHD, you also put yourself down about your behavior and throw in a few unkind words about your failures as a person too. These responses make everything more complicated.

Reducing negative thinking is crucial for fostering the self-esteem and resiliency we all need to live successful, productive, and connected lives. Whether it's self-criticism or blaming others, negative thinking impedes our ability to cope with anger successfully. It's one thing to acknowledge your behavior, apologize for it, and actively try to change it. It's another thing to add on a layer of berating yourself for your mistakes and seeing yourself as flawed because you make them. Do you do this? If so, what do you tell yourself? I bet that what you say in those low moments is very different than how you feel about yourself the rest of the time. Blaming others for your choices is equally ineffective. You've got to look at what you do with honesty and ownership, no matter how rotten it feels sometimes. Otherwise, you can't reduce the frustration and stress you experience. Blame is a toxic form of negative thinking that interferes with positive change.

Instead, practice self-compassion. Turn down the volume on that negative voice by reminding yourself that you are no worse or better than anyone else. Everyone makes mistakes. You are doing the best you can with the resources you have at any given moment. And, yes, some of those moments are better than others.

To decrease anger and frustration and find more equanimity, you've got to improve your emotional control, strengthen working memory, and reduce impulsivity. It's a tall order which starts with acting more like your GPS: You re-orient without judgment. You stop what you're doing, take some deep breaths, and change your direction.



Slow things down: Use STOP, THINK, ACT

The key to reducing reactivity is slowing things down. There's no way around this. You can't calm yourself down and settle your amygdala when you're in the midst of an escalating situation. When people experience intense feelings, they tend to act first, stop second, and think last. Instead, you want to switch this order around: Stop and breathe first, next reflect on what's happening and your options, and then act. The goal is improving self-regulation: Manage your big emotions by engaging the thinking brain and activating working memory. You call up rationality to perceive and articulate what's going on once you've rebalanced. I've had clients tell me that they say this over and over in their heads when things get heated so they can remember to follow it. Just by repeating the words STOP, THINK, ACT you kickstart your thinking process into making different choices when you're aggravated. Take the first step toward regaining balance by activating thinking and working memory skills.

When there is an amygdala hijack, you need enough awareness to keep it from steering you into a tailspin so you can take the wheel back and right yourself. This awareness comes from noticing what is happening inside your body when you are provoked as well as what is happening around you. Maybe your heart starts beating faster or you begin perspiring. Perhaps the people around you are speaking louder. What is your pattern when you have big feelings? These are clues that emotions are heating up and a **STOP** is in order. Breathing techniques, such as alternate nostril or belly breathing, can help you slow down, but when they are not enough, you need to call for a **TIME APART**.

Many people benefit from taking some time alone to pull themselves together. Instead of stomping off in anger, it's better to use Time Aparts: pre-negotiated breaks from problematic interactions when folks can cool down. Time Aparts differ from Time Outs because they are not punishments. Time Aparts are non-blaming separations to help everyone regulate.

Using Time Aparts effectively depends on knowing what triggers you when you're *not* in a meltdown. Relying on a pre-determined plan to calm down works much, much better than winging it in the middle of eruption. You'll have some good alternatives to blowing your top or withdrawing in a fury. See the sidebar on page 23 for the

steps for identifying your triggers and implementing Time Aparts in your family.

Time Aparts are best used at home. Some days, people catch themselves. At other times, the feelings may be too powerful, or you don't care and let it all out. It takes hard work to repeatedly direct your attention away from the tidal wave of emotion inside so expect to stumble around a bit. If you're in a public place and need some space to cool down, use my secret: Go to the bathroom. Wash your hands and breathe until you're calmer. It works every time.

Once the volcano has quieted down and molten lava has stopped flowing, you're ready to move to the **THINK** phase. You begin to make connections between emotions and behavior by noticing. It's the time to notice what is going on inside you and around you. This is not the time to strategize about emotional and behavioral patterns or give advice. This is the moment to assess your own thoughts, take stock of your words and behavior, be accountable and apologize. It's the moment to ask questions and hear responses from those around you, gathering information about what just happened as if you're Sherlock Holmes.

Instead of saying "You overreacted" or "I wish you would stop driving me crazy," ask non-blaming questions such as "What happened that you got so angry?" or "How did things become so heated up?" You speak about your experience with "I" statements that convey your feelings, not your criticism. For example: "**I feel** frustrated **when you** tell me what to do **because** I like to figure things for myself" NOT "**I feel that** you're really arrogant when you tell me what to do." Practice reflective listening: Repeat what your partner (or child) says to you, as exactly as you can, and ask them to do the same. As you listen to others and they hear you, things settle down even more.

Once people feel heard and acknowledged, everybody begins to move forward. You strategize ways to deal with the situation that set you (and likely someone else) off. You are ready to **ACT**. This is when you brainstorm ideas and use problem-solving techniques. You make agreements for the future which are realistic and a plan for checking back in. To enhance your working memory, make some notes or post-its for yourself with tips or reminders about those agreements.

It may seem truly impossible to pause and reflect when the steam is practically coming out of your ears. This is where you have to exert the most effort: You regulate yourself *first* before you do anything else. While it's natural to feel angry and frustrated at times, it's not okay to explode at people around you. Using **STOP, THINK, ACT** gives you a practical strategy for improving self-regulation and working memory skills and sets the stage for happier

How to Implement Time Aparts

Follow these steps for identifying your triggers and implementing Time Aparts in your family.

- 1. Figure out the top three things that set you off and write them down.** Why do these trouble you so much and what's helped alleviate them in the past? What are the signals in your body that these triggers are present or fast approaching? Make note of these, too.
- 2. Next, make a list of activities that help you get centered.** Some ideas could include deep breathing, listening to calming music, taking a walk, doing some yoga, and coloring. Figure out what helps you settle down and how much time you need to do it.
- 3. Make a specific time to speak to your partner (or your family) about the situations that lead to outbursts for everyone and explain Time Aparts.** What often upsets you also distresses your family members. No one likes emotional escalation, meltdowns, or yelling. Together, pick ONE situation that everybody agrees could be improved. Establish the parameters for using Time Aparts, such as the length of time, where people will go, and how to call for one. Your job will be to use the bodily signals that you've identified earlier that foreshadow your amygdala hijacks and dysregulation.

relationships. You'll still get angry sometimes; it's a natural part of life. But instead of these feelings driving you, you're managing them with competence and compassion. 🧠

Sharon Saline, PsyD, funnels her three decades of academic excellence and clinical experience helping families connect better and argue less into her book, *What Your ADHD Child Wishes You Knew: Working Together to Empower Kids for Success in School and Life*. The book received two highly acclaimed awards: American Book Fest's Best Book Award and Moms Choice Awards' Gold Medal. A magna cum laude graduate of Brown University, Dr. Saline received her master's degree from New College of California and her doctorate from the California School of Professional Psychology. Dr. Saline animatedly combines psychology with her love of theatre in her lectures and workshops. She is a lecturer at the Smith School for Social Work and frequently contributes to *Attention*, *ADDitude*, and *Psychology Today*. Learn more at drsharonsaline.com or reach her @DrSharonSaline.

NOTE

*Schmeichel, B.J., Volokhov, R.N. and Demaree, H.A. (2008). "Working memory capacity and the self-regulation of emotional expression and experience." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(6), 1526-40.

ADDITIONAL READING

Goleman, D. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995, 2005.