



How to Be Angry Better

by Dayle Malen, LCSW, MEd

MANY OF US, INCLUDING SOME PEOPLE WITH ADHD, have anger behavior problems. We know emotional dysregulation is a common reason for this. In their study on ADHD and emotional dysregulation, Philip Shaw and his colleagues define it as “an individual’s ability to modify an emotional state so as to promote adaptive, goal-oriented behaviors.” To modify one’s emotional state, one must have the ability to delay one’s action by having “in-sight”—looking inside one’s self to determine how one feels, what the issue is, and how to solve it. Unfortunately, one of the key characteristics of ADHD is impulsivity, which undermines the ability to have insight.

The skills necessary for behavioral/impulse control are:

- Notice you are angry.
- Think about why you are angry.
- Consider your options.
- Choose an appropriate response.

As you can see, this skill is not going to develop easily without the ability to self-regulate—to stop first and notice that you are angry, let alone think about how to respond not react to the trigger that caused you to be angry in the first place.

How is it possible for those with ADHD who have anger behavior issues to change their anger behavior? This article will address how to begin using epigenetics and rewiring our brain to learn how to be angry better through a communication theory called anger behavior management, using the FIB™ technique. FIB™ stands for Feeling, Issue, and Behavior.

Learning from epigenetics

When asked, “Why do you act that way,” many people reply, “That’s just the way I am.” The follow-up question should be, “But is that the way you want to be forever?” Many of us believe that the way we are can’t be changed. What if you were told you can not only change the way you act, but you can change your thoughts, your beliefs, your cells, and your genes? What if you

found out that science has proven you can change all those things—including your anger behavior?

The Human Genome Project was completed in 2003, allowing us to be able to read our genetic blueprint. Like any blueprint, it can be modified. The blueprint of our genes can not only be altered from within, but more importantly, from other sources—our thoughts, our interpretation of our experience, our actions, and the environment. The study of those forces is called epigenetics, defined as “the study of how variation in inherited traits can originate through means other than variations in DNA.” This is important, because while our genes give us the outline of who we are, we have the ultimate power of creating WHO we are—our thoughts, our beliefs, and our actions. Our DNA and genes do not determine who we are; instead they are affected by how we interpret and respond to our perception of the world around us.

All the programming we have within us—whether we chose to think or act a certain way, or we picked something up along the way as learned behavior from being around others—can be reprogrammed through intention, instruction, and insight. To change ourselves, we must change all that programming in our brains. It’s a good thing, then, that our brains are wiring themselves all the time through neuroplasticity, and all that wiring can be rewired through intention. Over time, that new wiring will

affect our genetic code, and we become whomever we design ourselves to be.

When it comes to changing our anger behavior, we must first want to—that's *intention*. Second, we must be given a design on how to do that—that's *instruction*. Then, we must be conscious about creating that design—that's *insight*. Change does not happen first; shifts happen first. At first, we will default to old behaviors. But over time, the frequency, intensity, and duration of our behaviors will change.

Anger behavior management

If we need to change our anger behavior, we are told to “manage” our anger. We are sent to anger management classes. The inference is that anger itself is the problem. Anger is *not* the problem; *anger behavior* is the problem.

Anger behavior can be a result of brain chemistry, brain structure, or from being around those who have not learned how to behave appropriately when they are angry. In that case, the brain literally becomes wired with the same inappropriate anger behaviors through mirror neurons. Or, we promise ourselves that we will never act that way and we go in the opposite direction—intentionally *not* expressing our anger at all. Let's be clear then—the problem is not being angry. As a matter of fact, anger is never a problem. You are probably justified in being angry. If you are so angry you want to hurt someone, having that anger is okay (as it really is okay to be angry), but it's your anger behavior that becomes the problem.

To change our emotional behaviors, we must first understand that our feelings have a purpose: They are a communication tool to assist us in understanding ourselves and the world around us. The purpose of our feelings is to signal us on the inside that there is something going on in our world on the outside. If we understand the definition of each of those signals, we can better understand what's going on and then we can try to find a way to return our world to the way we want it.

By definition, the signal of happy means our outer world is exactly the way we want it. The signal of sadness means there is a loss or “missingness” in our outer world. The signal of fear means there is danger in our outer world. The signal of anger means that someone or something just “rocked our world” and we aren't getting what we want. There it is: When we are angry, we aren't getting what we want, and inappropriate anger behaviors are basically temper tantrums, which do nothing to solve the original problem.

The theory of anger behavior management works on the premise that anger is a natural feeling and should be embraced, and that there is a resolution to the problem. Anger should be experienced as it is letting us know that something is wrong in our outer world. It is telling us that if we want it back to the way we like it, we must figure it out and solve the problem. The technique is called FIB™, standing for Feeling, Issue, Behavior. FIB™ is designed first to use to communicate within ourselves: to validate our feelings, figure out what we want, and then choose a behavior that will help us to solve the problem. Once that has been accomplished, we then use FIB™ to communicate the same informa-

tion to others with the intention of helping them understand how we feel, what we perceive the problem to be, and request them to help us solve it.

How FIB works

Let's consider an example of FIB™ in action. I want to watch TV, but my children have the music blaring. Using FIB™, I'd say to myself:

- F: “I'm so frustrated.”
- I: “What I want is to hear the TV, but instead that music is so loud I can't hear anything.”
- B: “What do I want to do to solve this?”

Notice that I have put the responsibility on myself to solve the problem. The easiest thing to do at this point is to make a request. So, then I'd use FIB™ in speaking with my children:

- F: “Hey guys, I'm really frustrated.” To which they will probably ask, “Why?”
- I: “I want to watch TV, but I can't hear it because the music is too loud.”
- B: “Would you please turn the music down so we can both get what we want?”

Notice that the intention of the resolution is to get us both what we want.

This technique is respectful. And because my children and I have communicated—rather than my ordering them to stop what they are doing while yelling at them and potentially escalating a situation unnecessarily—I have more than likely enlisted their aid in solving our problem with understanding.

Why is the FIB™ technique especially effective for individuals with ADHD? Let's look again at the skills for behavioral/impulse control:

- F: Validate your feelings.
- I: Think about why you are angry.
- B: Consider your option.
- Choose an appropriate response.

Anger management works on the order of thoughts, feelings, behavior. Anger behavior management works on the theory of feelings, thoughts (issue), then behavior. How can one think when one is caught up in one's feelings?

FIB™ requires a great deal of practice, as do all attempts to rewire the brain. It's effective, respectful, and most of all, this technique prevents our feelings of guilt and shame for anger behaviors we regret. Anger behavior management works for anyone with the intention of shifting their anger behavior. 🍌

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ADDITIONAL READING

Shaw P, Stringaris A, Nigg J, Leibenluft E. “Emotion Dysregulation in Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder” in *American Journal of Psychiatry*, March 2014; 171 (3): 276-293.

Habashi J, and Whitlock K. “Genetics and Epigenetics in the Psychology Classroom: How to Teach What Your Textbook Doesn't,” *Psychology Teacher Network*, February 2013. <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2013/02/genetics>