

## IS VENTING ANGER GOOD OR BAD?

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*(This article has been updated from the original which was written in March 2004.)*

Men who have angry outbursts and are hostile to others have a 10-30% greater risk of developing premature heart problems, including arrhythmia and stroke, than men who are able to remain calm. These are the findings of a 10 year study of nearly 3700 men and women who had no signs of heart disease, as published by the American Heart Association. Other studies have correlated migraines, weight gain, and marital problems to excessive venting of anger.

This is further scientific evidence of what most health and mental health professionals have long believed: **venting your anger, or otherwise acting out aggressive, hostile feelings, is a very unhealthy way to relieve stress.** Yet the common wisdom holds that it's good to get stuff off your chest, that you'll feel better if you let the anger out instead of keeping it bottled up inside. So how do you know what to believe?

### Ten Things I've Learned About Anger

1. It is not anger that builds up, but rather stress. Failing to express anger does not build up more anger.
2. Expressing anger does relieve stress, but only temporarily – other stress relief strategies are more effective in the long run.
3. Anger is not instinctive, like the “Fight or Flight” stress response. It is actually a learned response, often learned at an early age.
4. Anger blocks our awareness of painful emotions (like fear, sadness, guilt, humiliation) or uncomfortable sensations (like fatigue, overwork, stress).
5. Being angry also blocks clear thinking and interferes with problem-solving.
6. Anger can help: it can give us energy and courage to frighten off a potential attacker, or defend ourselves from a threat to our survival or well-being. But those truly threatening situations are rare, or should be, in most of our lives. We should reserve our angry responses for those times.
7. We pay a price for anger: there are physical costs (like the risks of heart problems mentioned above) as well as social costs (like the loss of a friendship, or the good will in a business relationship).
8. The more you vent, the less effective it is, because people around you will learn to ignore you, avoid you, or eventually, leave you.
9. There are more effective ways of relieving stress - exercise, stretching, deep breathing or progressive relaxation relieve physical tension without taking a toll on our health or our relationships.
10. More effective ways to deal with mental stress or threats to emotional well-being include: focusing on what is in your control, putting things in perspective, using positive self-talk or affirmations, re-framing, and meditating.

Remember, **expressing or acting out anger is a learned response, so it can be un-learned.** Individual counseling or anger management classes can help. Two excellent books on this subject are Matthew McKay's “*When Anger Hurts*” and “*When Anger Hurts Your Relationship*”. If you have a problem with anger, seek help now - your life may depend on it!