

Venting Makes Anger Worse – To Quell Anger, Do This Instead

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Research shows that "blowing off steam" through intense physical activity doesn't reduce anger and may actually increase it, contradicting popular belief about anger management
- › Calming techniques like meditation, mindfulness, relaxation and yoga are significantly more effective at reducing anger, hostility and aggressive behavior
- › Combining cognitive strategies with physical calming practices produces stronger results than either approach alone, suggesting both body and mind need attention
- › Mindfulness increases self-awareness and emotional control by activating brain regions that regulate emotions, helping you interrupt the anger cycle before it escalates
- › Regular practice of relaxation techniques helps lower baseline stress levels and prevents anger outbursts, providing long-term benefits for both mental and physical health

You've probably heard that letting off steam by hitting a punching bag or going for a run helps you cool down when you're angry. But recent evidence says otherwise. A review published in *Clinical Psychology Review* found that these approaches don't just fail to reduce anger – they might make it worse.¹

That's a problem, because anger isn't just uncomfortable. It's dangerous. While anger is a normal emotion, it becomes a serious threat to your health and relationships when you don't have the tools to calm it down. Instead of "blowing off steam," you need to cool the

system down. Let's look at the science behind what really works to settle down when you're overwhelmed by anger.

Calming Down Is Better Than Blowing Off Steam

A large-scale meta-analysis published in *Clinical Psychology Review* reviewed 154 studies involving 10,189 participants to uncover what actually works for reducing anger.²

The goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of activities that either increase or decrease bodily alertness – things like hitting a punching bag or going for a jog versus meditation or intentional breathing. The popular belief that venting helps you feel better didn't hold up. In fact, the opposite was true. Only calming, arousal-reducing activities consistently helped.

- **Anger dropped significantly in those who practiced calming techniques** – The researchers found that calming activities like breathing exercises, meditation and yoga led to a large reduction in anger. In contrast, activities that increased arousal had no meaningful effect on anger or aggression. In other words, trying to “let it out” by doing something intense didn't help.
- **Anger, hostility and aggression all improved with calming interventions** – The data showed that these calming methods didn't just reduce angry feelings – they also lowered hostility, which is the mental attitude behind anger, and aggressive behavior – how that anger gets expressed.
- **Time didn't reduce the effectiveness of calming methods** – Calming methods worked regardless of how long the session was or how many sessions someone completed. Whether the intervention was a single 20-minute guided breathing practice or a longer multi-week meditation program, the effect remained stable. So, if you're pressed for time, even short sessions make a difference, as long as they help you slow down rather than rev up.

Meditation and Mindfulness Deliver the Strongest Benefits

Not all calming techniques worked equally. Meditation delivered the strongest results, followed by mindfulness, relaxation and yoga. This shows structured practices that help you focus your mind and body – not just passive rest – have a powerful effect on cooling down your internal state.

- **Combining cognitive and calming strategies produced stronger results** – Activities that combined a calming physical experience, like slowing your breath, with a cognitive process, like focusing your thoughts or practicing kindness, were more effective than physical relaxation alone.

Cognitive-focused interventions lowered anger more than arousal-only approaches. This suggests that your mindset matters – calming your body helps, but **calming your thoughts** amplifies the effect.

- **Arousal-increasing activities failed to reduce anger and even made it worse** – Dealing with anger physically didn't help. Whether it was punching a bag, doing martial arts or going for a run, these arousal-increasing methods had little or no impact on anger levels. In some cases, they made things worse.

For example, jogging was associated with an increase in anger. Stair climbing and rowing also showed trends toward increased anger, while only ball sports and aerobic group activities produced slight improvements. But the majority of these intense, energizing activities failed to bring emotions down.

- **Jogging may increase anger by fueling frustration** – Researchers noted that jogging might raise anger because of its repetitive nature. It may not offer enough mental stimulation or emotional release, which makes frustration worse instead of better. Some people also feel trapped or powerless while jogging – like on a treadmill – which feeds feelings of **irritation or stress**.
- **Relaxing techniques lower heart rate and engage the parasympathetic nervous system** – While the study didn't dig deeply into biological mechanisms, the known science behind relaxation helps explain why it works.

Calming practices stimulate your parasympathetic nervous system – also called the “rest and digest” branch – which helps slow your heart rate, lower blood pressure and ease muscle tension. This shuts off the fight-or-flight response that fuels anger and aggression.

- **Mindfulness increases self-awareness and emotional control** – **Mindfulness** – intentionally paying attention to the present moment – activates parts of your brain that help regulate emotion. When you practice it regularly, you gain more control over impulsive reactions and develop more patience. It builds what psychologists call “self-efficacy,” or your belief that you can manage your feelings and actions effectively.

Use Relaxation to Interrupt the Anger Loop

You don't have to be at the mercy of your anger. You can stop the stress response before it spirals out of control – but to do that, you need to interrupt the cycle early. When you feel your body revving up, your breathing changing or your shoulders tightening, that's your signal to act. The research is clear: the more you try to blow off steam, the more pressure you build. The only reliable path out is through relaxation.

Your goal is to reduce your physiological arousal – the state of high energy and tension that primes you to lash out. Whether you're dealing with everyday irritations or chronic anger that affects your relationships and health, these strategies give you tools to regain control. Below are five steps you can take to cool your nervous system and **calm your mind**.

1. **Shift from reaction to awareness with mindfulness** – If you're a person who reacts quickly when upset, learning mindfulness will help you notice what's happening before you explode. That's your opportunity to choose a different response. Mindfulness means paying attention to your thoughts, body and feelings without judging them.

Try to observe your breath or sensations for five minutes a day. This gives your brain space to reset and reduces emotional reactivity over time.

- 2. Use intentional breathing to lower your internal pressure** – Instead of taking deep, vertical breaths that trigger the stress response, practice **horizontal breathing**. This means expanding your ribcage sideways rather than lifting your chest upward. Horizontal breathing **promotes relaxation** by avoiding the activation of stress pathways in your nervous system.

Do this for a few minutes, especially when you notice frustration building. You'll likely feel your heart rate slowing and your shoulders dropping. This is your body exiting the fight-or-flight state that fuels anger.

- 3. Try meditation to retrain your stress response** – If you struggle with persistent anger or resentment, **meditation** is a valuable long-term strategy. The research found it was the most powerful calming tool available.

You don't have to do anything fancy – just sit quietly, close your eyes and focus on your breath or a calming word. Guided meditations are helpful if you're just getting started. Aim for 10 minutes a day. Over time, this rewires how your brain handles stress and improves emotional control.

- 4. Use movement wisely to release – not increase – tension** – If you're someone who usually punches a bag or goes for a hard run to deal with anger, be aware that those high-intensity efforts could make it worse. Instead, try yoga, walking in nature or gentle stretching. These movements help lower adrenaline and **cortisol**, the hormones that drive your internal storm. They also keep your body active while allowing your nervous system to calm.

- 5. Practice regular relaxation before the anger hits** – If your stress builds over the day and then explodes, you're not alone – but you don't have to wait until the pressure gets too high. Build calming routines into your life daily, such as listening to calming music, doing progressive muscle relaxation, taking a quiet walk after work or sitting on your porch without your phone.

The key is consistency. You'll start to notice that your baseline anger level drops, and you'll have more space to respond instead of react. When you calm your body, you calm your mind. And when your mind is calm, you take back control over your choices. That's how real change starts.

FAQs About Anger

Q: How does anger affect my health if I don't deal with it properly?

A: Uncontrolled anger activates your fight-or-flight stress response, which raises your heart rate, blood pressure and adrenaline. Over time, this state of constant arousal increases your risk of heart disease, weakens your immune system and contributes to chronic inflammation. It also harms relationships and decision-making.

Q: Is venting or "blowing off steam" actually helpful for anger?

A: No. Contrary to popular belief, venting makes anger worse. According to the Clinical Psychology Review, venting – through yelling, punching pillows or aggressive workouts – tends to reinforce angry behavior and increase hostility rather than reduce it.

Q: What's the most effective way to calm down when I'm angry?

A: The most effective approach is to calm your body through relaxation techniques like intentional breathing, meditation and mindfulness. These practices reduce physiological arousal and interrupt the anger cycle. Over time, they help rewire your brain to handle stress more calmly.

Q: What type of exercise helps with anger control?

A: Low-arousal movement like yoga, walking or stretching is ideal. High-intensity workouts – like running or boxing – actually increase anger for some people. Choose movement that soothes rather than stimulates.

Q: How often should I practice these techniques to see results?

A: Daily practice is key. Even five to 10 minutes of mindfulness or relaxation each day helps lower your baseline stress and makes you less reactive. You don't need to wait until you're angry – using these tools consistently helps prevent outbursts before they start.

Sources and References

- [1, 2 Clinical Psychology Review April 2024, Volume 109, 102414](#)