



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 14: Getting a Handle on COVID Related Anger and Frustration

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith discusses getting a handle on COVID related anger and frustrations. And now, Emily Smith.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. The COVID pandemic has been a time of chronic stress, resulting in heightened tensions for many. Some may be on edge and may react to these stresses with anger. Frustration with others who share alarming and dangerous misinformation has caused arguments in both families and between strangers. Despite the availability of effective methods of preventing transmission of COVID, some have been disappointed that the pandemic is still ongoing. When we choose not to process emotions as they come, the result can be a reaction that seems outsized for the situation. These big reactions may be aggressive or even dangerous, but more often result in frustrations when we have difficulty expressing our needs effectively to others.

When anger and other negative emotions are left unresolved, the result is lower quality of life and damaged relationships. Negative emotions can impact physical health and worsen mental health conditions. In past Well@Work podcasts you've heard presenters explain how our emotions and behavior can impact our bodies; unaddressed anger may lead to trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, or strained relationships. Anger can manifest in physical symptoms like frequent headaches, dizziness, and muscle tension. Research finds those with unresolved negative emotions increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and digestive problems. Symptoms of depression and anxiety can co-occur with anger and may be exacerbated by one another.

Things have been a challenge for Tyler in his work as a respiratory therapist. Initially, he found the work to be engaging and rewarding. Throughout the pandemic, Tyler has followed CDC guidance, but many in his community have not. Now he's treating people his age friends from high school who are really sick. To cope, Tyler turned to his faith, but every church service offered prayers for those hospitalized with COVID, many of whom wouldn't take the advice of the CDC. So he stopped going. Work, where the stream of extremely ill people hasn't stopped, is no longer enjoyable. The other day, when someone

told him he didn't need to wear a mask, that he would be fine, Tyler lost his cool. In the middle of yelling at the unsuspecting person about how selfish and dangerous that idea is, Tyler caught himself and just walked away. He was embarrassed because he was taught to treat people with kindness even if he didn't agree with their decisions. Tyler decided he needed to talk to someone because his anger and frustration were interfering with his happiness.

If you or someone you know has been quick to respond with anger, here are some ways to regulate your emotions during challenging times.

Tip one: name it. When you acknowledge feelings of anger, you can take needed steps to calm down before responding. It is difficult to address an emotion if it isn't acknowledged. Anger is an emotional response to an event or the actions of another; it can be triggered by social injustice, a threat to our safety, fear, or hurt feelings. When you feel angry, it can help motivate you to make a change in order to protect yourself from others.

Tip two: try some self-compassion. That's right, how we treat ourselves has a lot to do with how we treat others. Anger and frustration represent unresolved issues that we are struggling with, often ineffectively. If we can remember to show compassion to ourselves we are more likely to be able to feel compassion for others, even if we believe them to be wrong. As compassion increases, our anger softens and becomes less of a burden to us.

Tip three: redirect your attention. Small actions or events may result in a big emotional response and you can't stop the angry thoughts, leading you to ruminate or continue to think about the event. To avoid ruminating on the source of your anger, choose to do an activity that distracts you like listening to music, being creative, or anything that brings you joy. Physical activity is a great distraction and also an effective way to increase positive emotions. Exercise has been shown to reduce stress, decrease anxiety, and boost well-being. Distraction alone isn't enough, engage in things that bring you joy. Immersion in any task-positive activity takes the energy out of the anger.

Tip four: know when to ask for help. If you find anger comes out of the blue, doesn't subside easily, or occurs at inappropriate times or in inappropriate places consider seeking help from a professional. It can be helpful to talk through some of your emotions to determine the causes of your outsized reactions. You may choose to access the EAP offered at your workplace. Find a link to our Well@Work podcast *Using Your EAP for Secondary Traumatic Stress* for tips on how to do that. Thank you for listening and remember to stay Well@Work.



Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.