

Twenty-Four-Hour Commitment to Act Calm

Notice it isn't a commitment to *be* calm, just to *act* that way. Effective anger management starts with a specific, time-limited decision. You need to commit to yourself and to key people in your life that you are going to behave in a calm, nonaggressive way. Not forever. That's impossible; no one could promise such a thing. Not even for a week. That's far too long, given how strong and habitual your anger response is. Your commitment is just for a single twenty-four-hour day.

Here's how you make it work:

1. Tell people. Share with every significant person in your life that you are absolutely committed to behaving in a calm way between _____ and _____. Explain that this means you won't shout at, swear at, hit, blame, attack, or denigrate *anyone*. Absolutely. No exceptions or excuses. Let them know that you're going to be vigilant and on guard for aggressive behavior throughout the designated time period.
2. Ask for help. There's a good chance—especially if you experience frequent, unpredictable anger—that this won't be easy. So you need real help, not just people's good wishes. Give family and friends a nonverbal signal they can use to let you know if you're looking or sounding angry. Something like a referee's time-out sign, or the gesture an umpire uses when a player slides in safe, or just a slowly descending hand that means "relax, calm down." Whatever signal you want to use, write it in the space below and tell people how it works.

Prepare yourself in advance, that whenever you see the signal you will stop talking until you can once again appear calm. Remember, you don't have to *be* calm, just *act* calm.

3. Sign a contract. Have one close person sign as witness to the contract below.

Twenty-Four-Hour Commitment

I, _____, between _____ o'clock on _____,
(date)
 and _____ o'clock on _____, promise to behave
(date)
 in a calm, nonaggressive manner. I will act calmly no matter what stress or
 provocation may occur.

Your signature

Witness signature

4. See the benefit. What's the number one thing you want to achieve through anger management? A better relationship with your spouse, your kids, your friends? A chance to heal old wounds with your family? A better shot at rewards and promotions at work? A renewed feeling of pride and self-worth? An end to dangerous or costly behavior? Whatever is your biggest and best reason for acting calm, write it in the space below:
- _____
- _____

5. Plan for provocations. Assume that during the twenty-four hours, things will happen to upset you. A few of them you can probably even anticipate. Write below at least four provoking events that could threaten your commitment to calm behavior.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____

To face these or similar anger triggers, you'll need a few simple strategies.

What to Do When You Get Angry

First, and most important, stop. Don't do or say anything. Don't act on the angry feelings. This is just an emotion. It's a strong one, but you can feel it without turning it into behavior.

Try to step back from the feeling and label it. Notice its strength: be aware of how it pushes you toward action. Accept it. There's nothing inherently wrong with anger. It's just a signal that you're in pain. The only problem is when you act on anger to hurt others or yourself.

Don't push the feeling away, but don't try to hold onto it either. It will come like a wave—building, cresting, then slowly receding. Let it come, and then let it go. Watch how it grows and diminishes, as if you were a scientist observing some interesting phenomenon. Take care not to do anything to amplify your anger. Don't dwell on the unfairness of the situation.

Don't review past failings of the offending individual. Don't rehearse in your mind the events leading to your anger. Just notice and accept the feeling, watching as it gradually diminishes.

Act the Opposite

One of the quickest ways to change a painful feeling is to act the opposite. During your twenty-four-hour commitment to calm behavior, anger can be a signal to put a very different face on your emotions.

- Smile instead of frown. The very act of smiling when angry tends to diminish the strength of your upset feelings.
- Speak softly rather than loudly. Go overboard on this. Make your voice lower and gentler than usual; try to make it soothing.
- Relax instead of tighten. Let your arms hang loose. Take a breath. Lean against something in a casual way or sit with your legs crossed comfortably. Look calm, even if you don't feel it.
- Disengage rather than attack. You may want to get right in the other person's face. You may want to shake them—emotionally if not physically. Instead, look or walk away. Make no comment about the provoking situation. Save it for another time. You'll only blow up if you try to deal with this now.
- Empathize rather than judge. Say something mildly supportive, such as, "This is a difficult situation for you," or "I can see why you're concerned (upset, overwhelmed, dismayed, etc.)." It's okay if you don't feel supportive and the words seem phony. You can have a strong desire to take a two-by-four to the other person. But just *behave* as if you can appreciate their point of view.

"You rammed the car into the garage door? (gritting your teeth) When you're rushed, it's easy to get rattled." "You got a D+ on your math test? (rapidly growing knot in your stomach) You've been distracted, I think, but we can get back on track."

Beyond the First Twenty-four Hours

When you've gotten through the first twenty-four hours, you have a choice. Make additional twenty-four-hour commitments (blank contracts are at the end of the chapter), or monitor your anger (using forms found in chapter 3). In either case, start working through the book to build your new anger management skills.

Notice the word "working" in the last sentence. Simply reading this book isn't enough. It will take a real effort to change such a powerful response habit. You'll need to actually complete the worksheets, exercises, and monitoring activities. And you'll need to practice your new skills every day. It's going to take time and energy, but the benefits you'll achieve by changing your angry behavior will be more than worth it.