

# Strategies for Managing Angry Employees



# Objectives:

- To understand a basic definition of anger
- To recognize the causes of anger
- To recognize hidden anger
- To learn strategies for defusing workplace anger
- What do you want to discuss?

# Let's define anger

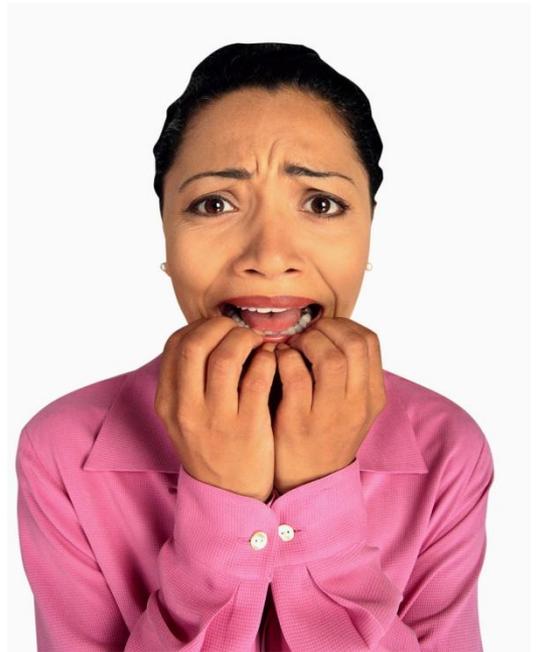
- Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion. We've all felt anger; perhaps as a fleeting annoyance or as a full-fledged **rage**. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems: problems at work, in your personal relationships and in the overall quality of your life.

# Anger is an emotion

- Like other emotions, anger is accompanied by physiological and biological changes. When you feel angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as does the level of your energy hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline.
- Anger can be caused by both external and internal events. You could be angry at a specific person (such as a coworker or supervisor) or at an event (a traffic jam or a canceled flight), or anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about personal problems. Also memories of traumatic or enraging events can trigger angry feelings.

# Let's talk about you

- When you are confronted by an angry person how do you react?



# Common negative responses

- **Getting angry back:** Raising voice, interrupting, speaking disrespectfully.
- **Feeling intimidated:** Overly apologetic, letting the angry person take over the interaction.
- **Escaping:** Trying to end (or refer) the conversation as fast as possible to make the angry person go away.

# Things to know about anger

- 1. It is a powerful survival tool
- 2. It is a response to pain (physical or psychological)
- 3. It is a source of energy
- 4. It is a secondary emotion \*
- 5. When we are angry, the brain downshifts to a lower evolutionary level
- 6. Prolonged anger is unhealthy
- 7. Repressed anger is also unhealthy

# Primary vs. Secondary Feelings

- Perhaps the most helpful thing to remember about anger is that it is a secondary emotion. A primary feeling is what is felt immediately before we feel angry. We always feel something else first before we get angry.
- We might first feel afraid, attacked, offended, disrespected, forced, trapped, or pressured. If any of these feelings are intense enough, we think of the emotion as anger.

# Anger as a Response to Fear

- One of the primitive functions of an animal's response to fear is to frighten away the attacker. But in modern human life, we often frighten away those who we need and care about most.

# Causes of Anger

- Perhaps we think someone did something “wrong”.
- Perhaps our understanding of an agreement was broken.
- Maybe someone lied to us and we think they shouldn’t have.
- Something happened which we “think” should not have happened.
- Or something didn’t happen which we “think” should have happened.
- Perhaps we think someone did not treat us fairly.

# Invisible anger

- Passive-aggressive personality disorder (also referred to as negativistic personality disorder) is a controversial personality disorder marked by a pervasive pattern of negative attitudes and passive resistance in many interpersonal situations both on and off the job

# People feel entitled to be angry

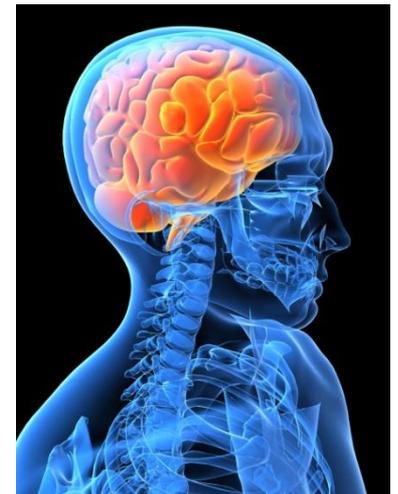
- Draw on your own experience
- Dealing with our own anger is one thing. Dealing with another angry person is another. When we are angry we feel we have every right to be angry. We can justify our feelings. When someone else is angry, we just can't figure them out. We don't understand what is wrong with them.

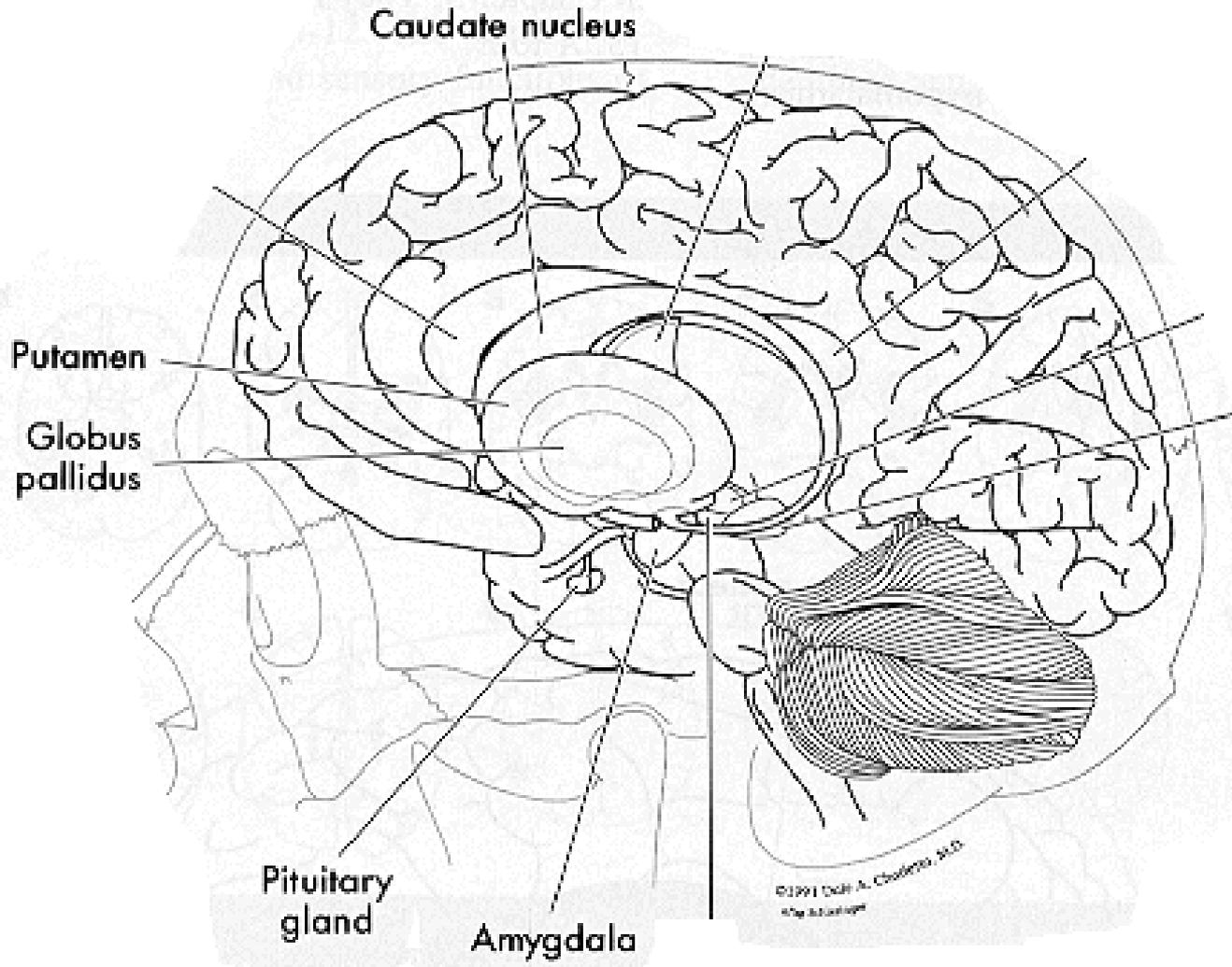
# Why conflict can set us off.

- Most conflict initially sets off our fight or flight instincts.
- These instincts require no thought. They are autonomic.
- The parts of the brain that are working initially are the amygdala and the Reptilian brain. These are the two most primitive parts of the brain.

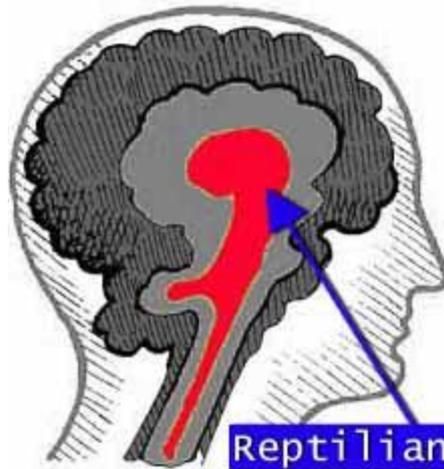
# The Brain

- The Amygdala triggers emotional responses. And is responsible for emotional memory.
- The Reptilian Brain triggers the flight or fight sequence.
- Neither of these brain parts are responsible for higher, rational thought.





- The brain stem is the oldest and smallest region in the evolving human brain. It evolved hundreds of millions of years ago and is more like the entire brain of present-day reptiles. For this reason, it is often called the 'reptilian brain'. Various clumps of cells in the brain stem determine the brain's general level of alertness



# Rage or anger?

- If an employee is in a rage you might want to get help quick. Safety in numbers.
- Ask the employee to go home if things are out of hand.
- An outburst is not necessarily rage but just the manifestation of anger.

# Some tips and things to try.

- It is important to remember if someone is an uncontrollable rage “tricks” will not work. Get help.

# Evaluate the situation

- Anger is a signal that things are not as they should be.
- What did the angry person want that he or she did not get?
- How do you feel about the other person's anger?
- Is their anger justified? Why?

- Choose your battles. How important is this one? Is it worth fighting for? Why?
- What is your goal in this situation?
- Have you or the angry person been harmed? How?
- Was the harm intentional?

- Do you need to make a change in your own behavior? How?
- Does the angry person need to make a change in behavior? How?
- Will you be angry if the other person can't or won't change to please you?

- What part of the situation can you control?
- Do you need to give this person more positive attention?
- Do you need to spend less time with this person?
- What limits do you need to set in your relationship?

- Fear is usually the cause of anger. What could the angry person be afraid of? What might you be afraid of?
- What are your expectations?
- Are your expectations realistic? Why, or why not?
- Are you willing to change your expectations to more realistic ones?

# Tips and tactics



# Give Your Undivided Attention

- When people feel they have your attention they feel validated; they feel important. The converse is also true: people feel less important and sometimes feel they need to up the ante if they feel like they need attention.



# Be Nonjudgmental

- If someone says, "They are intentionally screwing up my work." A supervisor's immediate reaction might be to think that the person is crazy. That reaction, especially if verbalized, will probably upset the individual even more.



# Focus on Feelings

- Going back to the previous example, if an individual says, "They are intentionally screwing up my work." a feeling response might be, "That must feel disrespectful" or even, "Tell me what that feels like."



# Allow Silence

- Many of us are not good at allowing silence. We feel the need to “jump” in. Supervisors want to make sure the incident is handled quickly and peacefully. However, sometimes allowing that moment of silence can be the best choice.



# Empathetically Clarify Messages

- When an angry employee makes a statement, a supervisor may think he or she knows what the person means. The only way to be sure is to ask. Sometimes a question may be perceived as challenging and can make the employee defensive. So restatement is used instead.



# Note:

- It is much better to ask questions than to make statements. Do not say things that begin with..."You"... Like "You are always upset" or, "You are imagining things" Instead use questions. "Lately you seem very upset. What is happening to you?" or, "Why do you think this is happening?"

# Recognize Personal Limits

- Being a professional doesn't mean that a supervisor must be able to excel at everything. That's an unrealistic expectation. Know what your limits are. Know that sometimes it's not easy to leave problems alone. Sometimes the most professional decision is to let someone else take over, if that's an option. Contact EAP if you feel the situation will be ongoing or very challenging.

# A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS FOR DE-ESCALATING ANGER

- 1. Let the employee vent.** Listen and encourage them to talk without interrupting. Use words like “I see,” or “Go ahead.” Don’t try to cut them off. (Benefit: Begins the rapport, shows that you respect them.)
- 2. When the employee pauses (you’ll hear a break or a change in tone), recap and ask for confirmation:** “As I understand it, your concern is XYZ, is that correct?” (Benefit: Shows employee you listened and that you understand the issue. Gives employee chance to clarify.)

3. Ask if there is **anything else they wanted to add**. (Benefit: Shows you're not rushing them. Enables you to get more information. Positions you as the one controlling the interaction.)
4. **Begin to problem solve** together with the employee. (Benefit: Mutual striving to solve the problem; not adversarial.)