

Anger FFISH: What's Beneath Your Anger?

Quick Guide by Tim Tedder, LMHC, NCC

Anger can become destructive if it is unleashed without restraint. The mistake people make in managing anger is in focusing too much on the anger itself rather than looking at what's beneath it.

When the focus is just on feeling angry, you probably either shut up (stuffing the anger down) or blow up (giving full vent to the anger). Instead, you need to learn to view anger as a warning signal for deeper troubling emotions that should be properly recognized and expressed.

Think of it this way: Imagine fishing at the end of a dock, your bobber floating in the water with line and hook dangling invisibly below. When your bobber begins to jiggle and then drop below the surface, you get excited. Why? Because you love to watch the bobber move? No. You react because you know there is a fish down there. The goal is to catch fish, not to make bobbers bounce.

Anger is like the bobber, agitated on the surface. If you focus on the agitation rather than fishing for what's below, you're paying attention to the wrong thing. You will get stuck in behaviors that produce no real relief. So instead, when you experience agitation, **go fishing for the deeper emotion**. Identify what's underneath your anger and focus your attention on that instead.

Before you do that, however, you have to *control your anger* in a healthy way. Your initial feeling of anger may be totally out of your control. It is an emotional response to a perceived risk that rises up to put you in protection mode before you even have time to process it cognitively. That response is extremely beneficial when you are experiencing an external threat (someone jumping out in a dark alley, for example), but not so beneficial when dealing with internal threats from someone with whom you desire intimate connection. In those situations, anger may actually become the enemy of what you ultimately want: a close relationship.



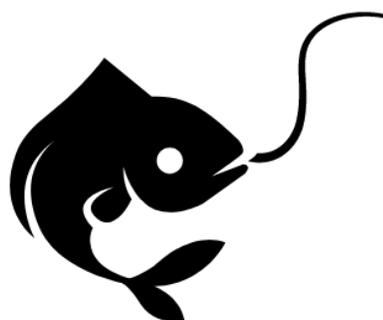
F | Frustration

F | Fear

I | Injustice

S | Shame

H | Hurt



Controlling Anger

Before you properly process the anger you're feeling, you have to gain some control over your response. Here are three specific steps you can take to help you shift away from an anger-controlled state:

1. **Start Softly**

Dr. John Gottman is a leading marriage researcher who concludes that most damaging conflicts between couples can be avoided simply by practicing this one thing: make sure you start the conversation in a way that is calm and inviting rather than aggressive and confrontational. He calls it a "soft start." It is nearly impossible for the other person to have a reasoned, calm response if you start harshly. In fact, if you fail to begin with a soft start, the best thing you can do is back off (step one) and try again later.

2. **Take a Time Out**

The old advice to "count to 10" is a simple example of stepping back from the immediate reaction and giving time for emotions to settle down before you re-engage in a conversation. Whether you need 10 seconds, 10 minutes, or 10 hours, walk away from the encounter with a commitment to come back and talk about it again when your emotions have stabilized. Only return when you can be intentional about how you choose to speak and act.

3. **Be Curious**

Anger is stirred up between two people when both are trying to convince each other "I'm right and you're wrong." Go into the conversation being very honest about your point of view, but focus on being curious about the other person's perspective, even if you don't agree with it. You will be surprised at how the tone of a conversation will change when one person moves to a position of curiosity. Often, the other person will switch to curiosity as well. That's when real communication begins.

Processing Anger

Once you have stepped out of anger's control, you can begin to consider the source of the anger. What is triggering that response? What is the FFISH underneath your anger bobber?

It's usually one or more of these five things:

- **Frustration** (something keeping you from getting what you want; feeling powerless)
- **Fear** (perception of risk or threat against you or your relationship)
- **Injustice** (reaction to unjust or unfair treatment; feeling offended or violated)
- **Shame** (feelings of embarrassment, failure, unworthiness, or guilt)
- **Hurt** (physical or emotional pain)

Once you have a sense of what is beneath your anger, you can have an honest conversation about it. Instead of moving away or against the other person, this level of vulnerability provides a context in which you can move toward each other.

Let's take a look at each one of them. Remember, your anger may be triggered because just one of these deeper issues is under the surface, but often your anger is an indication of multiple unresolved issues tugging on the line. In fact, people who tend to overreact to a seemingly small annoyance are probably doing so simply because it is the last little thing to get hooked on a line already full of active, unresolved issues.

Anger that indicates FRUSTRATION

Is there an obstacle blocking your way? Do you have unmet expectations? Is something interfering with a goal or desired outcome? Is there an outward or inward limitation keeping you from something you want or need? Do you feel a sense of powerlessness? (By the way, the recipient of your anger may not be the source of your frustration.)

Anger that indicates FEAR

Do you feel at risk? Do you feel threatened? Is something or someone you value being threatened or attacked? Do you feel insecure?

Anger that indicates INJUSTICE

Have you been treated unfairly? Have you been accused of something you did not do? Are you experiencing the consequences of someone else's bad choice? Have you witnessed someone else being victimized? (A word of caution: The claim of injustice should not be used as a means to avoid personal responsibility. Your default reaction might be "It's not my fault" while a more honest review of the event might show that you carry some responsibility for what happened. Examples of injustice: acts of abuse, betrayal, greed, violence, false accusations, gaslighting, theft.)

Anger that indicates SHAME

Do you feel guilty? Embarrassed? Are you being accused in a way that stings because there may be some truth to it? Is someone's criticism pointing out a failure or inadequacy? Is there something hidden that you refuse to admit?

Anger that indicates HURT

Have you been physically or emotionally wounded? Have you been disappointed or let down? Have you been treated unfairly? Are you experiencing grief?

If you only focus on the bobber, you'll never get to the source of your agitation and will not be able to resolve the anger. But if you learn to see anger as the bobber that signals the presence of your FFISH, you can (1) gain better insight into your emotional reactions, (2) communicate more honestly with others about what's really going on, and (3) resolve your anger more quickly.

By the way, if you are confronted by someone else's anger, you won't always know which FFISH is causing their reaction. But as soon as you can get your eye off their bobber (their angry response) and start to be curious about what might really be going on, you'll move from defensiveness to empathy, and that leads to the possibility of a much better outcome.

Remember, next time the bobber starts to bounce, go FFISHing!

When you experience agitation, go fishing for the deeper emotion. Identify what's underneath your anger and deal with it.