

Breathe, don't vent: Turning down the heat is key to managing anger, study suggests

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Venting about a source of anger might feel good in the moment, but it's not effective at reducing the rage, new research suggests.

Instead, techniques often used to address stress—[deep breathing](#), mindfulness, meditation, yoga or even counting to 10—have been shown to be more effective at decreasing anger and aggression.

Researchers analyzed over 150 studies involving more than 10,000 participants and found that what really works to reduce anger is lowering physiological arousal—in other words, turning down the heat. Activities that increased arousal overall had no effect on anger, and some activities made it worse—particularly jogging.

"I think it's really important to bust the myth that if you're angry you should blow off steam—get it off your chest," said senior author Brad Bushman, professor of communication at The Ohio State University. "Venting anger might sound like a good idea, but there's not a shred of scientific evidence to support catharsis theory.

"To reduce anger, it is better to engage in activities that decrease arousal levels," Bushman said. "Despite what popular wisdom may suggest, even going for a run is not an effective strategy because it increases arousal levels and ends up being counterproductive."

The [study](#) was led by first author Sophie Kjærvi, who completed the review for her Ohio State dissertation. It was published online March 11 in the journal *Clinical Psychology Review*.

Kjærvi, now a postdoctoral fellow at Virginia Commonwealth University, said the work was inspired in part by the rising popularity of rage rooms that promote smashing things (such as glass, plates and electronics) to work through angry feelings.

"I wanted to debunk the whole theory of expressing anger as a way of coping with it," she said. "We wanted to show that reducing arousal, and actually the physiological aspect of it, is really important."

The meta-analytic review was based on 154 studies involving 10,189 participants of different genders, races, ages and cultures. The study selection and analysis were guided by the [Schachter-Singer two-factor theory](#), which assumes that all emotions, including anger, consist of physiological arousal and mental meanings. To get rid of anger, you can work on either of those.

Several previous meta-analytic reviews have focused on changing mental meanings using [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), which works. However, Kjærviik and Bushman said a meta-analytic review on the role of arousal would fill an important gap in understanding how to resolve anger. Their analysis focused on examining both arousal-increasing activities (e.g., hitting a bag, jogging, cycling, swimming) and arousal-decreasing activities (e.g., deep breathing, mindfulness, meditation, yoga).

Results showed that arousal-decreasing activities were effective at fending off the fury in labs and field settings, using [digital platforms](#) or in-person instruction, and in group and individual sessions across multiple populations: [college students](#) and non-students, people with and without a criminal history, and individuals with and without intellectual disabilities.

Arousal-decreasing activities that were effective at lowering anger across the board included deep breathing, relaxation, mindfulness, meditation, slow flow yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, diaphragmic breathing and taking a timeout.

"It was really interesting to see that progressive muscle relaxation and just relaxation in general might be as effective as approaches such as mindfulness and meditation," Kjærviik said. "And yoga, which can be more arousing than meditation and mindfulness, is still a way of calming and focusing on your breath that has the similar effect in reducing anger."

"Obviously in today's society, we're all dealing with a lot of stress, and we need ways of coping with that, too. Showing that the same strategies that work for stress actually also work for anger is beneficial."

In contrast, activities that increased arousal were generally ineffective, but also produced a complex range of outcomes. Jogging was the most likely to increase anger, while [physical education classes](#) and playing ball sports had an arousal-decreasing effect—suggesting to the researchers that introducing an element of play into physical activity may at least increase positive emotions or counteract negative feelings.

Finding that increasing arousal was not the answer to anger corresponded with previous work led by Bushman that linked venting anger with continued aggression.

"Certain physical activities that increase arousal may be good for your heart, but they're definitely not the best way to reduce anger," Bushman said. "It's really a battle because angry people want to vent, but our research shows that any good feeling we get from venting actually reinforces aggression."

That being the case, the authors noted that many arousal-decreasing interventions shown to lower the heat of anger are free or inexpensive and easy to access.

"You don't need to necessarily book an appointment with a cognitive behavioral therapist to deal with [anger](#). You can download an app for free on your phone, or you can find a YouTube video if you need guidance," Kjærvik said. "It can't be really hard because you're in a state of fighting arousal, and you're ready to fight if you're really angry."

More information: Sophie Lyngesen Kjærvik et al, A meta-analytic review of anger management activities that increase or decrease arousal: What fuels or douses rage?, *Clinical Psychology Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102414](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102414)

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