

Toolbox Talk

Anger & Irritability



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers recognise when anger and irritability may be signs of pressure building up, understand how they can affect work and home life and learn simple ways to slow things down before frustration takes over.

Have you ever snapped at someone over something tiny and then thought afterwards, “Why did that bother me so much?” Maybe someone cuts you up on the drive home and you completely lose your temper. A workmate asks you a simple question and you bite their head off. You get home and find yourself getting annoyed with your partner or kids over something that normally wouldn't bother you. Sometimes anger is about the thing that's just happened but sometimes that small thing is simply the final bit of pressure on top of everything else you've been carrying. We often imagine someone struggling with their mental health as being quiet, upset or withdrawn. That's not always what it looks like. For some people, stress, worry, exhaustion or feeling overwhelmed comes out as anger and irritability instead.

Why It Matters

Construction can test anyone's patience. You're working to deadlines, dealing with delays, changing plans, missing materials, other trades in your way, traffic, customers and sometimes people asking you to do something yesterday that you've only just been told about today. Add an early start, a poor night's sleep or problems outside work and it's easy to understand why tempers can become shorter. Anger itself isn't automatically a bad thing. We all get angry. It can tell us that something feels unfair, frustrating or out of our control. The problem is what happens when anger starts becoming our normal reaction to everything around us. On site, losing your temper can affect communication and safety. You might rush a job because you're frustrated, make a poor decision in the heat of the moment or end up arguing with someone when you should both be concentrating on the task. Away from work, that same frustration can follow you home and affect the people closest to you. The important thing is recognising when you're becoming angry more often than usual and asking yourself what might actually be sitting underneath it.



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Signs To Look Out For

Sometimes the signs are obvious: shouting, swearing, arguments or losing your temper but anger can show up in quieter ways too. You might notice you're constantly irritated by small things, have less patience with people or feel like everyone around you is getting on your nerves. You might find yourself gripping the steering wheel on the way home, replaying conversations in your head or struggling to let things go after work. You may start avoiding people because you know you're in a bad mood or find yourself saying things in the moment that you regret afterwards. Physically, you might notice your heart beating faster, your jaw tightening, your shoulders tensing or that feeling of heat building up when something annoys you. Those physical signs can sometimes give you a few seconds' warning before your reaction takes over. You may notice changes in a workmate too. Someone who normally has plenty of patience might suddenly start snapping at everyone, arguing more often or reacting strongly to small problems. That doesn't excuse bad behaviour but it can sometimes tell us that something else is going on.

What Can Help

The first thing is to recognise your own warning signs. Everyone's are slightly different. Maybe your voice gets louder, you start swearing more, your chest feels tight or you can feel yourself becoming wound up. The earlier you notice those signs, the more chance you have of choosing what you do next. If you can, create a bit of space before reacting. Walk away for five minutes, get some air, have a drink of water or simply stop talking until you've had a chance to calm down. You don't have to win every argument in the moment. Sometimes the best decision is to deal with something when your head is clearer. It can also help to ask yourself what you're actually angry about.



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Is it really the person in front of you, or are you exhausted? Is work getting on top of you? Is something happening at home? Are you worried about money? Sometimes the argument is about a missing tool but the real pressure has been building for weeks. Think about what helps you bring your stress levels down outside work too. Exercise, walking, getting outside, talking to someone or having some proper time away from work can all help release some of that pressure before it starts coming out at the wrong people. If you do lose your temper, take responsibility for it. Saying, "Sorry mate, I was out of order there," doesn't make you weak. It can stop a small argument becoming something much bigger and if anger is becoming difficult to control, damaging relationships or making you worried about how you're behaving, speak to someone. That could be someone you trust, your GP, a counsellor or another support service. You don't have to wait until you've said or done something you seriously regret before getting some support.

Discussion Questions

- What usually makes people's tempers shorter on a busy construction site?
- What are the early signs that tell you you're starting to lose your patience?
- What can we do as a team to deal with disagreements before they turn into arguments?

Takeaway Message

Anger is something we all experience but if you're getting angry more often, reacting more strongly or taking frustration home with you every day, it's worth paying attention to. Sometimes anger is the problem in front of us. Other times it's a sign that there's too much pressure underneath the surface. Recognising that early gives you the chance to slow down, deal with what's actually going on and avoid taking things out on the people around you.



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Action

The next time something gets on your nerves today, notice what happens before you react. Give yourself a few seconds and ask whether the situation really needs the reaction you're about to give it and if someone you work with has become noticeably more irritable or short-tempered lately, don't automatically assume they're just being difficult. When things have calmed down, ask them if everything's alright. There might be more going on than you can see.



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