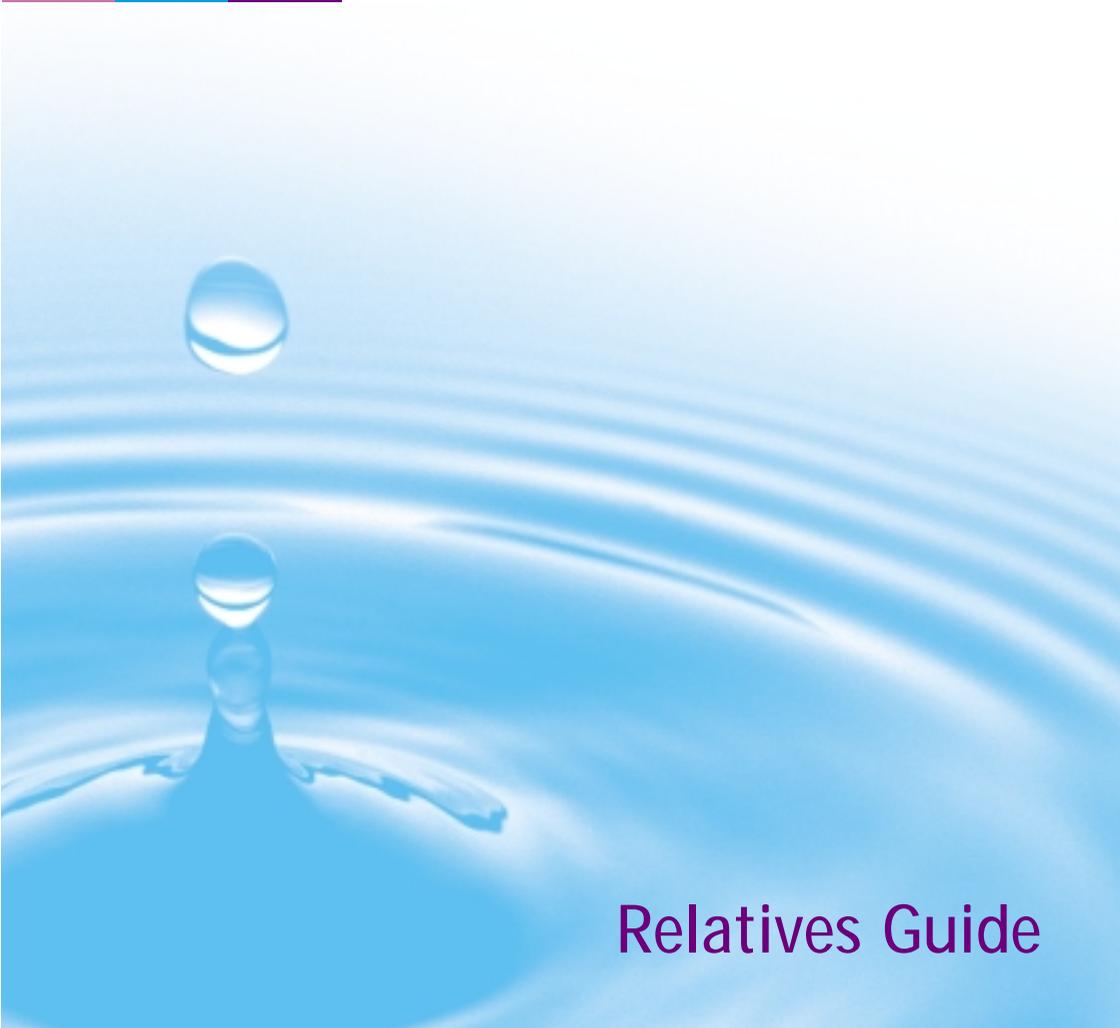


Sudden death  
Anger management



Relatives Guide

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*The* ROYAL  
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**Victims Unit: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister**



## What is anger?

Anger is a normal emotion that can vary from annoyance to rage. It is natural to have different levels of anger at different times in your life.

Anger is caused by what other people do to us and by what we do ourselves. Stress, upsetting memories, poor sleep, drugs, alcohol, illness, worry, and poor communication all play a role in getting us angry. It is okay to feel angry, but it is important to remember that *acting* on this feeling usually makes things worse.

Anger is a natural response when you feel threatened. Your brain releases hormones and chemicals to give a rush of energy. The way you think changes so that you focus on feeling threatened or wronged, instead of focussing on what other people think. In highly threatening situations, this is a way for you to protect yourself as a last resort.

Sudden death can make people very angry. Dealing with unfairness, blame, abandonment, and having to carry on with life is difficult. Anger will resolve itself with time, but sometimes you may need help to control your anger or express it safely.

## Anger management

Usually, if you have a problem with anger you will know it yourself. You may act in ways that feel out of control or frightening, or sometimes other people (especially family members) will notice a change. Things that were not a problem in the past may now make you very angry. The goal of anger management is to reduce the pressure to act out aggression. Anger management involves:

- Identifying things that trigger your anger (such as not being listened to) can help you understand why you feel the way you do
- Finding new ways to react will give you more control over your emotions, relationships, and normal life
- Using avoidance, relaxation and distraction to control or prevent anger
- Finding safe methods of expressing anger and burning energy – you may have to spend time finding a way that works for you

## Skills for managing anger

**Awareness and preparation** – this is the most effective method of managing anger. Finding out what causes your anger and planning what to do when things go wrong can give you back a sense of control and optimism.

It is important to realise the changes that occur when you begin to get angry:

- Heart beat speeds up
- Frowning
- Tension in the shoulders
- Racing thoughts
- Breathing speeds up
- Feeling flushed
- Headache
- Shaking/sweating

Once you feel these changes you know you are getting angry and need to do something to stop it. You may choose to ignore the feeling, to avoid other people until you are feeling calmer, or to use relaxation or distraction to calm down immediately. You could also release your anger in a safe way (shouting into a pillow, vigorous work or exercise).

Talking to a friend or keeping an anger diary of when and how anger takes control can help you see patterns in your reactions. See if there are triggers for your anger:

- places, people, times, or occasions
- memories of what happened
- stress and lack of sleep
- caffeine, alcohol, drugs
- family members, co-workers, finances.

**Avoidance** – avoidance is a good way of managing the sources of your stress. Sudden death can leave you with overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, and injustice. Memories and reminders of what happened will be difficult to deal with early on. Avoid unnecessary reminders and responsibilities until you are ready for them. For example, you may avoid thinking about what happened during working hours (scheduled worry), but make time to think about it later.



**Distraction** – distraction is a good way of dealing with anger when you can't avoid the situation. Switch your attention away from your anger when it is destructive, and think about it again when you feel calmer. Try to focus on:

- a sensation (slowing down your breathing)
- an action (counting backwards in threes from a hundred)
- a thought (repeating "I am calm" to yourself)

Different methods of distraction will suit you more than others (e.g. listening to music), so practice your own method of distraction to make sure it works. Sometimes the distraction can be something that relaxes you, such as taking long deep breaths to calm down. Using distraction will give you back more control over your emotions and thinking.

**Relaxation** – this is an important skill following sudden death. Learning to relax again can take time, especially if you feel unsafe.

People relax in different ways, from taking a bath, reading a book, or watching television to long walks, running, or playing sports. Not every relaxation technique will be suitable for you, but most people are good at finding at least one that works for them. This is an important tool to help you calm down after a bout of anger or a hard day. Following sudden death, you may need to find different methods of relaxing or unwinding than you used in the past. Examples of relaxing activities include:

- Yoga
- Fresh air
- Fitness training
- Talking on the phone
- Walking
- Games
- Jogging
- Reading
- Controlled breathing
- Structured Relaxation
- Exercise
- Hobbies
- Music
- Socialising
- Massage

### Guidelines

**Be flexible** – your needs and emotions will change as you work through your grief and anger. Be flexible and creative in helping yourself – the more individual your approach the better.

- What works for one person may not work for another
- What works at one time may not work later on
- Men and women are likely to cope in different ways
- Be prepared to try different things

**Make time to think about what happened** – you may be tempted to avoid thinking about what happened if it is too distressing. Having a set time (every day or week) to think about this will allow you to prepare for being upset and angry. You may want to do this in private, with a trusted friend, or with a therapist/counsellor. Many people use this time to create a scrapbook or diary to help work through their feelings and concerns.

- Make time for reflection in your daily or weekly routine
- Plan what has to be done in this time (e.g. reflection, writing)
- Allow time afterwards for relaxation

**Use good communication** – good communication can remove the need for anger. This is because it achieves the same end – releasing emotional stress and making yourself understood – without the need for aggression. Bottling up your anger and saying nothing will only make things worse. When you are angry, a lot of what you say and do will affect other people and make the situation worse. If you avoid talking about the underlying causes of your anger or hide your anger, it will surface again later. Try to think about why you are angry, and talk about it with a friend when you are calm. Get a friend or family member to help you identify the early warning signs.

- Think about how you act when angry (and how you would like to act instead)
- Think through what you want to say before answering someone (this may feel slow at first but you will get faster)
- Speak in a clear voice, and go slowly
- Listen to other people and their concerns
- Check that people understand you
- Make all of your complaints as specific as possible (try not to use the words like always, never, and every time)
- Keep talking

**Be prepared for triggers** – find out exactly where, when, and what makes you angry (e.g. not being listened to), and use this to understand why you react the way you do. Knowing personal warning signs that anger is on the rise (e.g. flushed face, faster heart beat and breathing) can help you stop your anger before it takes hold. If you think a situation has too many anger triggers (i.e. it is guaranteed to make you angry), then take a friend



with you to help you stay calm, or practice relaxation before and after you go there.

- Find out what triggers your anger – do certain things, people, or situations make you angry more than others? Why?
- Be aware of day-to-day triggers (e.g. finance, work, other people)
- Be aware of personal warning signs (e.g. faster pulse)

**Dealing with anger** – practice how to deal with anger. Some people use distraction to take a step back from their anger, whereas others may use relaxation, humour, or having a friend or family member with them. Think about what works best for you. Whatever way you decide on, it must be one that you are comfortable with and you can use at any time.

- Identify and practice a personal method of mental distraction (e.g. a happy memory, a breathing exercise) to interrupt angry thoughts
- Remind yourself that you are in control of your anger and you can overcome it
- Use relaxation or vigorous exercise to reduce stress
- Make time to think about why you are angry, how it is triggered, and why it is important to you
- Express anger in a controlled way (e.g. in an anger diary, shouting into a pillow)
- Use humour when you can
- Get help and advice from others

## The future

Many people will either experience only moderate amounts of strong anger or none at all following a sudden death. Anger is likely to be directed at particular people or groups, and should fade and or be resolved naturally without having to complete any of the steps outlined in this booklet.

For some people, anger can take longer to fade, and affect work, education, family, sleep, etc. It can be helpful to understand more about anger, how to recognise it before it takes control, and how to develop your own ways of managing it.

People whose anger does not fade with time or causes them a lot of distress may wish to consult their GP, health visitor, or social worker for further information on anger management or help with related difficulties (such as anxiety or sleep disturbance). Information on specialist services for anger and traumatic grief can also be obtained from GPs.

Anger relating to a sudden death can appear immediately or after a number of years. Be prepared for anger to resurface (in you or your family) in response to the media, anniversaries, or other reminders, and refer back to the guidelines for advice.

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# Anger management

## Summary

Anger is a common feeling among traumatically bereaved people. Dealing with injustice, blame, or the necessity of continuing on with life can be great sources of frustration. Normally this anger will resolve itself, but can sometimes be prolonged or reappear from time to time in response to reminders of trauma and loss. Problems with anger control can be eased through the anger management steps outlined below.

## Preparation

**Identify your anger triggers** – things that you see, hear, smell, or feel that trigger your anger. Examples: people, places, times of day or year, finances, news items, tiredness, alcohol, traumatic memories, traumatic reminders, etc.

**Identify your personal warning signs** – thoughts and bodily signals that you are becoming angry. Examples: build-up of angry thoughts or images, racing pulse, fast breathing, tension in the shoulders or neck, flushed face, headache, irritability, etc.

## Plan ahead –

- Decide how to deal with people or situations which trigger your anger, and practice the method you chose. Prepare yourself for situations which you think might be especially likely to trigger your anger.
- Decide what to do when you feel your mind and body becoming angry. You will need to calm your thoughts as well as your physical anger. Practice the method(s) you choose.

## Skills

**Avoidance** – avoid situations which are more likely to get you angry. These can be approached at a later time.

**Distraction** – redirect your thinking away from thoughts and images that make you angry. Identify and practice a method in advance.

**Relaxation** – make time for relaxation. Identify and practice a method



until you are happy that you can become relaxed in a short space of time. Identify positive activities that might relieve your stress, tension, or angry feelings and make time for these (e.g. exercise, fitness training, writing, hobbies, etc.).

## Guidelines

**Take a flexible approach** – your levels of anger will vary over time so be flexible in how you approach the stresses of life. Men and women are likely to have different coping methods and triggers. If something doesn't work, try again or try something new!

**Use good communication** – listen and give yourself time to respond; be specific; speak slowly and clearly; check with other people that everyone has the same understanding; and keep talking with other people.

**Set aside time to think about issues that make you angry** – plan what has to be done during this time, and allow time for relaxation afterwards.

