Fist-clenching anger
Releasing the steam without boiling over

By Shelley Widhalm
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 Aristotle psychology professor Kent Norman admits he has chopped up a computer with an ax, burned a mouse with a blowtorch and popped the keys off a keyboard.

Unlike Adam Sandler's character in "Anger Management," a timid businessman who threw a fit over every mishap, Mr. Norman was comically demonstrating appropriate ways to handle anger.

Mr. Norman, associate professor at the University of Maryland in College Park, used old computer equipment to demonstrate on videotape how to release computer rage without harming someone or destroying something of value. Rage is anger expressed through aggressive behavior.

"When you're in a situation of anger, you're likely to be irrational and do things you would later regret," says Mr. Norman, who holds a doctorate in psychology. "The problem with frustration and anger is often it can generalize. You can strike at anything when you're angry."

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Mr. Norman and other metro-area psychologists and psychiatrists suggest different ways of keeping under control frustration that, if not tempered, can turn to anger and acting out. Maybe an obstacle interferes with a goal in mind, or something is lost, such as time, money or respect. Maybe something undesirable occurs, or things become rushed or inconvenient.

Is anger the best response?

"Anger is essentially a message that something is wrong, same with physical pain," says David Kupfer, a clinical psychologist who operates an independent practice in Falls Church. "It's a way we learn when we have to make changes in the way we deal with people or the world."

Anger can be a healthy, educating emotion, but staying angry is not healthy, says Mr. Kupfer, who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology.

"The idea behind anger is it's a response to danger ... to get the body revved up for flight or fight, but if it becomes habitual, it can take its toll," says Dr. Everett Siegel, assistant professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

Anger pumps up adrenaline, increases the heart rate and blood pressure, and spurs a person into action. However, once anger becomes chronic, it can put stress on the body and cause a variety of health problems, including increased risk for coronary disease, high blood pressure and stroke. Chronic anger can weaken the immune system, lead to anxiety and tension, and cause neck and back pain, headaches and ulcers.

Anger also can spoil a good mood, says Paul Hauck, a psychologist in independent practice in Rock Island, Ill. and an author and lecturer.

"Nobody makes you angry. If you make demands, you will get angry," says Mr. Hauck, who holds a doctorate in political psychology. "Anger happens when you change your mind from a wish to a demand."

Wishing for, wanting or desiring something that is not received has the emotional consequences of disappointment, regret and sadness, he says. If the desire, however, becomes a demand, a person's response can turn to bitterness, resentment and even anger.

"To avoid anger, change a demand back to a wish," Mr. Hauck says.

Anger can be justified in some circumstances, say when a person is betrayed by a friend or attacked by someone else, says Pauline Wallin, a clinical psychologist who operates a private practice in Camp Hill, Pa., and serves as a life coach nationwide. However, throwing hissy fits over minor irritations is unhealthy and destructive, she says.

Ms. Wallin labels the part of the self that wants its way and wants it now the inner brat. The brat is narcissistic, self-centered and still acts like a 2-year-old.

"Under stress, we revert to those old ways, more immature ways of coping, which is demanding, acting impulsively, screaming, yelling and feeling like a victim," says Ms. Wallin, who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology.

Ms. Wallin recommends a three-step process for handling the brat. First, she suggests calming down through deep breathing and saying everything is OK. "Your inner brat is that side of you that gets so worked up. You really can't talk to a brat that is upset," Ms. Wallin says. "Once you're calm enough, you can listen to what the inner brat is saying. ... If you pay attention, you'll realize you're making certain assumptions about things."

The next step, Ms. Wallin says, is to put things into perspective. Will what has occurred matter tomorrow or next week? Suppose a dollar of energy is available, and the incident consumes 50 cents worth of energy, would it be worth it? Ms. Wallin asks.

And third, use humor to exaggerate the situation, she says.

Mr. Norman recommends fantasizing getting even or venting in a funny way, such as imagining throwing a computer out the window, in addition to acting out on something used or of no value. Second, he says, step back from and review the situation, thinking about what provoked the anger and whether one's response is appropriate for that situation. And third, try to minimize the situation, asking if it really matters.

"Most anger is because you're frustrated about solving a problem. When you step away, you're likely to come up with other ways to solve the problem," Mr. Norman says.

Reacting in anger can be a matter of genetics, a learned behavior or a response to environmental factors, such as a stressful job, psychologists and psychiatrists say. Whatever the cause, they say Sigmund Freud's theory that anger needs to be vented is not the best approach to handling anger. Instead, research shows acting on anger actually feeds it instead of getting rid of it.

"Anger is not like a hot fluid or gas. It's something that is a reaction to a situation," Mr. Norman says. "The anger, in a sense, needs to be converted into a more positive approach."

Mr. Kupfer recommends accepting the situation and forgiving those involved.

"It's this more recent mindfulness approach. The source of our anger is in ourselves, not the other person," Mr. Kupfer says, adding that rather than acting out, one should change expectations, calm down and forgive.

"Ultimately, forgiveness is the cure for anger," he says.

The best way to handle anger, according to Dr. Peterson, is verbally, not physically.

"It's good for people to be in touch with their feelings and to verbalize them," says Dr. Peterson, a psychiatrist and chairman of the department of psychiatry at Washington Hospital Center in Northwest. "If we are unable to express and disperse feelings through ordinary ways through language, then they tend to come out through our body."