

# “Help me shake off my angry edge!”

Feeling irritable lately? Our experts reveal how to discover what's behind an uptick in *grrr* and how to use your compassion to recall your joy

### Notice triggers

#### Swap shame for curiosity

“While men tend to feel guilt after an angry episode, women often feel profound shame,” says anger expert Russell Kolts, Ph.D. “But shame prevents us from investigating what made us vulnerable to anger.” Instead of blaming yourself, ask questions like: *When does my angry edge come out? Did I feel powerless when I lost my temper—or was I tired?* “This helps you shift from self-blame to curiosity, and in time, you’ll start to understand your triggers.”

#### Cue calm in seconds

We evolved to react aggressively to threats, explains emotions expert Alice Boyes, Ph.D. The result: We have a “hostility bias” that leads us to interpret ambiguous cues as negative and feel attacked even when no one was on the offense. “Luckily, we can

train ourselves to notice our biases before we overreact,” she assures. “If, for example, your partner asks a question you interpret as a criticism, ask yourself: *Is my attack-signaling system misfiring? Is there another way to interpret this?*” This small shift helps you cool off almost immediately.

#### Pause the personal

Another common anger trap is *personalizing*. If someone says something odd to you, do you think it's because *you* said something wrong? To break this pattern, we must learn to tolerate uncertainty, says Boyes. “Being okay with not knowing if something was personal helps calm us,” she says. Next time you're fixating on someone's

intentions, imagine playing a game of tug of war. “Instead of pulling harder, visualize dropping the rope. As you practice this, you'll start to feel less reactive.”



### Shift your focus

#### Call on your big heart

Instead of dwelling on whatever irritated you, tune into your compassion. “Take a moment to note that the next person you see just wants to be happy and not suffer,” says Kolts. “Soon, when something sparks your anger, you’ll find it easier to react empathetically.”

#### Tell a larger story

When someone is rude, it's easier to be compassionate if we imagine what might be going on in their world. “The woman snapping at the waitress about the temperature of the coffee is not upset about the coffee,” says psychologist Susan Pollak,

Ed.D. “She may be depleted from caring for a parent or worried about money, so the coffee is her only treat.” Her circumstances don't excuse her, “but considering them helps you rise above her rudeness.”

#### Honor common bonds

“A powerful way to nurture your compassion is by volunteering in a setting that truly speaks to your soul,” says Kolts. Pollak notes the power of giving back to a special cause: “As we help others, we're reminded of our common humanity and that we're all in this together—instead of letting the irritability we sometimes feel divide us, let the *joy* we feel bring us closer.”

## Our expert panel



**Russell Kolts, Ph.D.**, is a psychologist who wrote *The Compassionate-Mind Guide to Managing Your Anger*. Watch his popular TEDx talk on anger on Youtube.com.



**Alice Boyes, Ph.D.**, author of *The Healthy Mind Toolkit* and *The Anxiety Toolkit*, is an emotions expert and popular blogger at PsychologyToday.com.



**Susan Pollak, Ed.D.**, author of *Self-Compassion for Parents*, teaches mindfulness at Harvard Medical School. More at DrSusanPollak.com.

Getty (3), Text: Katie Alberts