

AARGH!

We are a nation of hotheads who can't get through one day without getting irate. In a bid to calm down, *Stylist* investigates anger management

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I knew I'd made a mistake the moment I pushed her. It was as if my arms had become separated from my body, fuelled by the

heat rising from the pit of my stomach and spreading across my chest. Yes, we were both drunk, and yes, we were having a *blazing* row, but I was the one who made it physical. When I look back on that night I can see I was out of control. I'd never laid a hand on anyone before, let alone one of my oldest and dearest friends. And although it was only a shove, it was enough to dampen our friendship forever.

This is not the only time I've given my mind over to anger. There have been thoughtless spiky comments which reduced my mother to tears; a close call with

the LAPD after an argument with a bouncer on holiday (I told him he'd never satisfied a woman); and an entire five-year relationship that was blighted with snide, passive aggressive taunts. I look back on these occasions and feel physically sick (although I can raise a smile about the bouncer) because most of the things I regret in my life happened when I was angry.

But I know I've got company. Picture how you felt the last time someone sidled in front of you at a bar. Or when you were on hold for 45 minutes, only to be passed between five people, just to get new broadband set up. Yes, that's the picture. And it's not pretty. The truth is, we are a generation of ragers, and we're getting angrier in almost every aspect of our lives.

A 2012 study by PruHealth found the number of women



experiencing 'office rage' is on the rise, with almost a quarter of us suffering meltdowns at work; kicking furniture, flipping keyboards and slamming down phone receivers. We're angrier at home, too. A recent report from Duke University in North Carolina found that women who don't get enough sleep are angrier and more hostile than men who get the same amount, which might explain why you spend your morning shouting at the toaster and sneering at *BBC Breakfast*. But with rising levels of stress (studies have shown that a quarter of women in the UK feel stressed more than eight times a week) surely some degree of simmering female fury is inevitable?

However, it seems that it's the way we show anger that's changed. Our Victorian counterparts were taught displays of emotion were embarrassing and unladylike, but a century of progression later means we now don't think twice about shrieking across the office when an email just. Won't. Send.

"How we're becoming angry is evolving," says Dr Jay Watts, clinical psychologist and senior lecturer at City University, London. She believes modern life has raised our expectations so high that we throw 'tantrums' if we're denied anything, from our daily flat white (in under two minutes, thanks) to a robust phone signal in the deepest recesses of the Outer Hebrides. But the effects of too much anger can be catastrophic. Evidence suggests frequent outbursts weaken our immune systems and increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes. So it's with this in mind that I, Lizzie, a chronic rager, signed up to a three-day intensive anger management course.

First things first, I'm actually quite a nice person. My friends would describe me as empathetic, warm and a solid shoulder to cry on; I donate to charity; I've even been known to help injured animals. I feel. I care. But I do have a problem: I am an angry woman. Not an explosive, Incredible Hulk, launch-a-desk-at-someone angry, but a seething, passive aggressive type that stands two inches behind slow people on escalators and sighs theatrically when people dither at the cash machine. Frankly, it's embarrassing. On more than one occasion I've spun round on the bus, ready to glare at the stranger bashing their bag into me, only to find a small child innocently pawing at my leg.

I've got a reputation at work too. Case in point: tea hijackers. This is my

term for people who steal the water from your boiled kettle while you're collecting mugs for a tea round. It makes me *unfathomably* angry. I'll return to my desk hissing about the "bloody tea hijackers" under my breath (my colleagues sensibly stay quiet). I know I'm not alone. You need only step onto the streets to see people unleashing years of bottled fury on tiny, inconsequential details. Just the other day I walked past a cyclist, pedalling furiously and yelling "F*CK OFF" at hapless pedestrians. Like everyone else, I judged him. Other people's anger is ugly.

Keen to change my furious ways, I signed up for the British Association of Anger Management's Beating

Anger course. Which is how I found myself in an art and therapy centre in East Grinstead, a room smattered with tepid watercolour landscapes and mid-century furniture.

**DAY ONE:
ANGER MANAGEMENT**

Walking in, my gaze is met by wan-faced women in floaty floral skirts making things out of clay. I roll my eyes. I'm really *not* a therapy person and I'm extremely dubious about any chirpy goatee beard-style therapising.

But I'm trying to keep an open mind. I've already completed a stress test online and my results fell solidly in the two highest stress categories.

WHAT TYPE OF ANGRY ARE YOU?

Recognising which category you fall into is the first step to dealing with an out-of-control temper

EXPLODER

INTIMIDATOR

The intimidator is classically angry. Their objective is to instill fear in others. They will explode with anger; shouting, eyeballing, body posturing and can turn to aggression when triggered.

ACCUSER

The accuser is defensive and will start an argument with a machine-gun spray of questions: "Why are you late? Where have you been?" Their aim is to make others feel guilt and shame.

DISTANCER

The distancer will withdraw and 'climb into their cave' when faced with a trigger. They intellectualise everything. It is a more measured response to anger but can also be passive aggressive.

IMPLODER

BLUNDER-BUSS

The most physical and explosive of the types, the blunderbuss is prone to swearing at inanimate objects, slamming phones, banging doors and throwing crockery.

JOKER

The joker expresses their anger by winding people up. Instead of facing a conflict, they will revert to anger disguised as humour. When challenged they say, "I'm only joking, don't take it seriously!"

POOR ME

This person thinks they're a victim. They'll say, "Why are you being horrible to me?" and are usually passive aggressive, expressing anger sideways (by indirectly insulting or undermining others).

For me, like many other women, stress manifests physically: rashes, palpitations, insomnia, flu. And I'm not the only one in my family to have suffered. My father passed away in 2004 from an aggressive form of cancer which began with a brain tumour. He was told stress was a major contributing factor to his disease. I fear if I carry on in this direction I'll end up the same way.

There are nine of us sat in a circle; two women and seven men.

We range in age from early 20s to late 60s and in occupation from IT consultants to business directors. Mike Fisher, course leader and anger management 'guru' is exactly what you'd expect. He looks like the lovechild of a portly Zeus and Colonel Sanders. He wears khaki trousers and flannel shirts and says things like, "Today, I feel powerful."

The very first thing we do is 'check in'. We're asked to give our name and talk about why we're here. Sounds straightforward but it is *intense*.

Everyone has their own devastating story, including a young guy who feels an unjust prison sentence for a bar brawl has ruined his chances of a normal life, a father who's been

'advised' to attend by the courts and a young woman going through the 12-step recovery programme following a harrowing eating disorder. These people have had their lives turned *upside down* by anger, and every one of them is here to salvage their relationship with their spouse. I'm not really sure where I fit in. I've never been physically violent (bar the unfortunate shoving incident), I love my job and have a brilliant, supportive boyfriend. When the room's attention shifts to me, not only am I petrified about what I'm about to say but such a profound sense of sadness hangs over the room, I'm already crying.

I shakily tell the group about feeling so fit to burst with stress that it has no choice but to flood out as anger. I tell them how I worry that this stress is going to send me to an early grave, like my father. "Do you worry a lot?" asks Fisher, pacing and stroking his chin. I pause, and feel the tears prick in my eyes. He doesn't realise it but he's hit on a very raw nerve. I nod. The truth is I worry *constantly*, every day, (and not just about being liked, performing well at work, or whether my boyfriend's going to leave me for someone thinner, blonder and far better at tennis). Mainly, I worry that I am going to lose another member of my family. I worry that my widowed mother is lonely. I worry almost hourly about the safety of my twin

✦ sister and older brother. And, for whatever reason, I have felt responsible for their happiness since my dad's death. Anyone who has lost a family member will also identify with the sense of unjustness that bereavement brings. But it's never something that I've articulated to anyone, let alone a group of strangers.

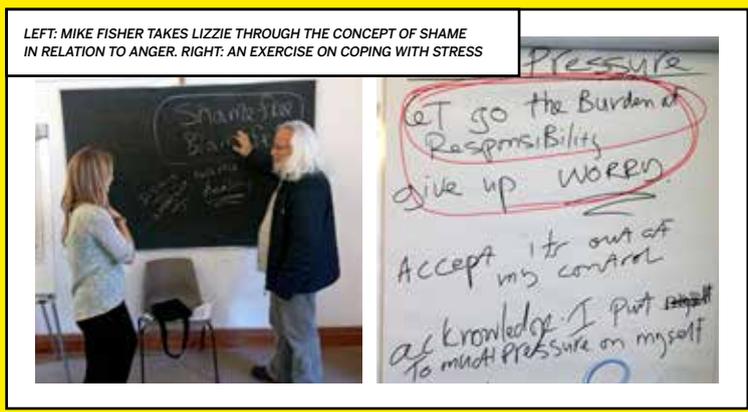
When I stop talking I'm completely drained, and still shaking. "This is heartbreaking," says Fisher, holding my gaze. Someone from the circle grunts in agreement. "You're obviously still grieving your father's death." I feel numb. "But all this stress and worrying is going to kill you, eventually." He tells me that I, like many women today, am guilty of 'over-empathising' or 'over-identifying' with others, at the sacrifice of my own health and mental well-being. And with all this stress and anxiety bubbling away, we are so on edge we react much quicker to any sort of anger trigger. "This is the most sophisticated form of self-harm. It's an almost Christ-like martyrdom," he says. I splutter with embarrassment and start to protest, but already he's moved on to the next person.

That evening, I feel like someone has sliced off the top of my head like a boiled egg, stuck a finger in and swirled it around. All I want is a glass of wine but we have been asked not to drink so our brains can assimilate this new information. I watch TV and imagine Jon Snow has turned into a gigantic glass of pinot grigio. But I don't drink. I sit in my empty flat, have a little cry and go to bed.

DAY TWO: REVELATIONS

At 11am on day two, I am recounting a tale of which I feel quite ashamed. On a recent holiday with my boyfriend, he (like every other man on the beach) became suddenly distracted by a blonde model-type lounging next to us. Instead of saying, "Darling, please try not to stare at the goddess," I shot up, announced, "You're a very starey person, aren't you?" and stormed off to the bar to quell my anger with medicinal quantities of rum. Apparently, this means I'm an imploder, the other end of the spectrum from people who rage with 'explosive' anger. Imploders internalise everything, causing them undue stress until it seeps out as 'sideways anger'. Exploders, on the other hand, have furious outbursts, sometimes physical, often very vocal (Gordon Ramsay is your point of reference here).

As an outwardly confident person, with a large group of friends and a job that requires me to talk to strangers on a daily basis, it seems almost misleading to tell you



I struggle with low self-esteem. But I do. I was never a self-conscious child, but my 20s have been plagued with self-doubt. This is no rare thing. Shine a light on half the women in the highest echelons of UK business and you'll find them battling inner demons. So my ears prick up when Fisher mentions shame. Anger, he says, is a low self-esteem issue. "Anger is the symptom and shame is the cause," he explains. "Everyone here suffers from what I call 'toxic shame'. They feel worthless, that they're 'imposing', that they're not as good as other people." The whole room nods. Think about this; how often do you feel worthless, or like a fraud? Perhaps you feel like you're inherently a bad person. That you deserve any bad things that happen to you and anything you do well is a fluke? I feel like this almost every day.

DAY THREE: DEEP ROOTS

When the final day arrives I am physically and emotionally exhausted (we're spending up to 10 hours a day in that small room). I've had another solemn night in the flat and my sister has been texting me for three days to

arrange a time to talk but I can't seem to respond. I feel as though I'm going through some sort of purging and I don't want to share that pain with her. I don't want her to feel even a fraction as bad as I do right now.

Today is about delving into our subconscious to find the buried roots of our anger. Mike introduces the 'detour method', which works on the assumption that anger is a reflex response to a buried trauma, and we need to be regressed to identify the root cause of that hurt. I'm a bit dubious – I'm reminded of a Jon Ronson article I read about a church congregation that started talking in tongues. We're separated into pairs and asked to think of a recent angry occasion, decide what age we 'feel' in our wounded state, then try and remember a traumatic incident that happened to us at that age. This, apparently, will reveal the buried pressure point that causes us to react defensively. I'm surprised to find that, with a lot of introspection, it works. I am able to link a recent event that made me angry (a stranger

making fun of me carrying some heavy shopping bags) to when I was bullied at school aged 10. Sounds simple but identifying the root cause makes me feel 'lighter'.

In the weeks following the course I feel noticeably more serene, but I'm soon confronted by a test situation. My boyfriend returns from a stag do, recounting sordid tales of whiskey and topless waitresses. "Isn't that a little misogynistic?" I ask, feeling the familiar heat rising within me. "Dunno, was just a bit of fun," he replies. While previously I might have stormed off to seethe, I take advice from Fisher and decide to *calmly* tell him how I feel. How I couldn't care less that he's seen another woman's chest – it is a stag do after all – but how I'm unnerved he doesn't see that asking a woman to serve you food in the nude is demeaning. "It makes me feel... upset," I say. Struggling for the right word. And that's it. End of the confrontation. As a whole, in fact, I'm beginning to let go of some of my worry and realise it's actually beneficial for those close to me if I'm less stressed. Yes, I've had the odd passive aggressive moment (usually involving sweaty, midsummer commutes) but I've realised the importance of talking through my anger. I'd almost say I'm a therapy convert. However, I've no plans to go anywhere near a yoga mat soon.

For more information about the British Association of Anger Management, visit angermanage.co.uk; tweet us about what really winds you up @StylistMagazine #argh

HOW TO KEEP YOUR COOL DURING AN ARGUMENT

If you're prone to getting into explosive arguments, Mike Fisher recommends the FLOW process to help you stay calm

F - FOCUS Plant your feet firmly on the ground and breathe slowly and deeply. Make each inhalation last for seven seconds and each exhalation last for eleven seconds. Focus your energy in your belly and keep breathing steadily.

L - LISTEN AND LEARN Concentrating on what the other person is saying keeps you present (an important part of anger management – you mustn't disappear inside your head) and helps you to learn what they really feel. Try to understand what they're saying or doing.

O - OBJECTIVITY Stop, think and take a look at the bigger picture. Do your best to empathise and not take what the other person is saying personally – this behaviour is linked to shame and means you'll lose all sense of objectivity about the situation.

W - WAIT In the heat of the moment it is vital to contain your feelings. Sit in your discomfort and wait until you can respond appropriately without any aggression or resentment. It always pays to wait.