

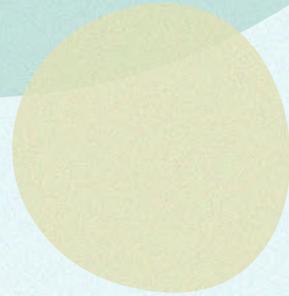


**ATLAS  
INSTITUTE**  
FOR VETERANS AND FAMILIES



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CENTRE FOR  
POSTTRAUMATIC  
MENTAL HEALTH



# GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING VETERANS WITH PROBLEMATIC ANGER

This guide provides professionals with practical and actionable tools to support Veterans experiencing problematic anger. Structured into four sections, the document combines theoretical knowledge, case illustrations and quotes, reflection activities and discussion of practical strategies to support professionals who regularly work with Veterans experiencing problematic anger.

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The lived and professional expertise that informed the development of this guide are primarily related to and reflective of the experiences of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans and their Family members. While there may be overlap between the experiences of those who have served in the CAF and members of the RCMP, the unique experiences of RCMP Veterans and their Families are not captured.

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# The importance of your work with Veterans

As a professional who engages with Veterans, your role is important. Veterans can face significant challenges post-service and your actions can help them navigate these difficult circumstances. Anger can frequently be a response to stress, trauma or unmet expectations. Successful interactions, even if they are at times tense or challenging, can increase a Veteran's confidence in managing difficult situations and create a safe environment where they can feel comfortable to ask for support around other concerns.

This guide is designed to enhance your existing expertise and offer you practical strategies to respond effectively to Veterans' anger-related challenges. Use this as a resource to grow your understanding and adapt your approach so you are equipped to work with Veterans to address the unique and complex anger triggers they may encounter.

By fostering understanding and creating supportive environments, you can contribute to an improved quality of life for Veterans, their Families and their communities.

## In a 2019 survey of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Veterans:

- A large majority (82%) reported high levels of satisfaction with life
- The proportion of Veterans reporting good or excellent dropped to 40%, down from 65% in 2010

## In a study examining problematic anger in 882 CAF personnel and Veterans referred to a specialized mental health clinic:

- Approximately 63% of participants reported experiencing problematic anger
- Those with problematic anger, in comparison to those who did not, had higher rates of:
  - Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom severity
  - Depression
  - Anxiety symptom frequency
  - Harmful drinking

## VETERAN VOICE

*In reality, anger is fuel and if you use it for good, you can actually accomplish so much. You can recognize something is not right and figure out why and actually have some amazing outcomes because anger allows you to fight for change.*

– Tabitha, CAF Veteran

# How problematic anger manifests

## What you need to know

As someone working in services supporting Veterans, your role can help them navigate the challenges they may face, including problematic anger. It is important to remember that anger can be a normal and adaptive human emotion but it can become a barrier when it disrupts relationships, work, well-being and day-to-day activities (e.g. road rage, yelling at the bank teller).

For some Veterans, anger can feel intense, overwhelming and difficult to control. It may be linked to past traumatic events or the discipline and demands of military life. What seems like an overreaction to a small trigger may reflect something deeper. In many cases, problematic anger is rooted in past experiences that continue to influence how a person reacts in the present.

Anger may also build over time. The weight of factors such as poor sleep, chronic pain, PTSD symptoms, day-to-day stress (e.g. traffic) or situational stressors (e.g. an argument with a partner) can add up and lower a person's capacity to cope. When this happens, a relatively minor incident can result in a stronger reaction than expected.

Understanding how problematic anger manifests is key to providing the support Veterans need to improve their quality of life.

### VETERAN FAMILY MEMBER VOICE

*He couldn't identify his feelings, like everything he felt came out as anger. If he was feeling anxious, he expressed it through anger. If he was feeling sad, he expressed it through anger. If he was feeling insecure, he expressed it through anger. Maybe he didn't know how he was feeling or how to express it — so he just expressed it all as anger, because it was in his tool bag.*

— Dawn, Veteran Family member

## Key characteristics of problematic anger

- **Intensity:** Veterans may describe their anger as something that escalates rapidly and feels uncontrollable. This intensity often reflects heightened flight-or-flight responses, making them quick to react.
- **Triggers:** Veterans may encounter external triggers such as perceived or real disrespect, feelings of unfairness, reminders of traumatic events or circumstances where “the rules” are not followed. Internal triggers — such as memories, intrusive thoughts or physical sensations — can also provoke strong emotional reactions. In some cases, ambiguous situations may feel threatening, leading to a heightened state of fear and anger.
- **Physical signs:** Problematic anger often involves physical signs, such as a racing heart, muscle tension or sweating. Recognizing these can help you identify when someone is struggling to manage their emotions. Signs may be less visible during phone or virtual interactions, but cues still exist. Listen for rapid or strained breathing, tension in their voice or abrupt changes in their speaking pace. On video calls, watch for clenched jaws, restlessness, shifts in posture or physical withdrawal (e.g. shutting off their camera, dropping off the call).
- **Cognitive patterns:** Veterans may develop unhelpful thought patterns, such as “Nobody gets what I’m going through,” “They’re deliberately out to get me” or “If I don’t stand up for myself, no one else will.” These thoughts can make anger feel justified and harder to address.
- **Behaviours:** Veterans may express anger through outbursts such as shouting or impulsive behaviour, which can damage relationships and create distance from others. On the other hand, some may withdraw to avoid conflict or in response to feelings of shame and guilt, which can lead to isolation and feelings of frustration.





## Why this matters in your role

Anger can make it harder for Veterans to connect with support services and get the care they need. Veterans experiencing problematic anger may reject help, avoid communication or struggle to engage with processes designed to assist them. Anger can also mask deeper issues such as trauma, depression or feelings of loss, making it more difficult to identify what is really needed to support them in improving their quality of life.

Episodes of anger can also lead to feelings of embarrassment or shame, especially when a Veteran realizes the impact their behaviour has had on others. This can create an additional barrier, as Veterans may feel reluctant to return for services out of fear of being judged or reminded of their actions. For some, these emotions may reinforce a cycle of avoidance, where the fear of facing others or acknowledging their anger prevents them from getting the support they need to move forward.

Understanding this dynamic is critical for those who work with Veterans. While Veterans should be held accountable when their anger crosses a line, creating an environment where Veterans feel safe and accepted – even after challenging episodes – can make a significant difference. Showing patience, empathy and a nonjudgmental attitude helps to rebuild trust and lets Veterans know they are welcome to return. By addressing these feelings of embarrassment and/or shame, you can play a key role in encouraging Veterans to stay engaged with the services that are vital for their well-being and recovery.

### Peter's story

Peter, a 41-year-old Veteran, served two tours in Afghanistan. Since transitioning to post-service life, he has struggled with anger, often lashing out at his Family or turning to alcohol to cope. His wife describes him as “on edge” and his teenaged sons avoid him. Peter explains:

***“I feel like a bomb waiting to go off. My Family walks on eggshells around me and I don't even know how to stop.”***

Peter's anger is frequently triggered by everyday irritations such as noisy children, traffic delays or perceived disrespect. These seemingly minor events provoke intense reactions, often driven by the heightened situational awareness that was essential during his military service. He blames others for his reactions and struggles to recognize how his behaviour is affecting his Family and his health.

## Reflection exercise

# Enhancing your approach to supporting Veterans with problematic anger

## 1 Reflect on your experiences

Take a moment to consider your past interactions with Veterans who've displayed problematic anger like Peter's. Answer the following questions:

- What were the common challenges or barriers you faced in providing support?
- How did the Veteran's anger manifest in terms of intensity, triggers, physical signs, cognitive patterns and/or behaviours?
- How did you respond and what was the outcome of those interactions?
- Were there moments where anger led to embarrassment and/or shame for the Veteran and how did you address this? Keep in mind that these moments can elicit many different emotions and embarrassment/shame is just one possible response.

Write down your reflections in a journal, on a piece of paper or in a secure document on your phone or computer.

## 2 Analyze your approach

Based on your reflections, think about how your current practices align with the information about problematic anger. Consider these prompts:

- **Understanding anger:** Did you recognize the triggers or patterns of anger in the Veteran(s) you worked with?
- **Building trust:** How effectively did you create a safe, nonjudgmental environment for the Veteran(s)?
- **Communicating clearly:** In what ways did you adapt your communication style to suit the Veteran's preferences, especially given many prefer direct and to-the-point language?
- **Addressing barriers:** Were you able to identify and address the factors that made it harder for the Veteran to connect with support services?
- **Responding to embarrassment:** How did you handle situations where a Veteran's anger led to feelings of shame, embarrassment, disconnection or reluctance to return for follow-up?

### 3 Plan for change

Use the insights from your reflection to identify one or two specific changes you can make in your approach to supporting Veterans with problematic anger. These could include:

- Improving your ability to recognize physical or behavioural signs of anger.
- Practising responses that validate a Veteran's feelings without condoning aggression. For example:

***“It’s okay to feel angry. Lots of people would feel the same in your shoes. What’s not okay is yelling at the staff. Let’s take a moment and then see if we can sort this out together.”***

***“You’re obviously upset and I want to understand what’s going on. I do need us to speak respectfully, though or I’ll need to pause this conversation until we can both do that.”***

- Asking the Veteran how they like to be communicated with and then adapting your communication style accordingly.

- Ensuring workplace practices are trauma-informed. For example:
  - Reducing loud announcements in waiting areas.
  - Sharing intake forms and accessible case notes so Veterans don’t need to repeatedly recount distressing details to different staff members.
  - Offering appointment reminders in plain language.
  - Creating a quiet reception space or intake area.
- Developing strategies to reduce embarrassment and/or shame after anger episodes, such as reassuring Veterans that their reactions are part of the challenges they’re facing and that they are not judged.
- Learning to address anger constructively by offering tools or resources that Veterans can use to manage their triggers and emotions.

➤ See the [exercise section](#) for handouts with strategies to manage challenging emotions.

## 4 Apply what you've learned

Set a goal for how you will implement these changes in your daily work. Write down one specific action you will take in the next week to improve your interactions with Veterans who experience anger. For example:

*“I will practise identifying physical signs of anger and responding calmly during escalated situations.”*

*“I will do what I can to familiarize myself with a Veteran’s background information, e.g. rank, trade, history, etc., to avoid the need for the Veteran to repeat their story more than is necessary.”*

*“I will create a welcoming environment by acknowledging that Veterans may feel embarrassed and by offering reassurance that they can always return for support.”*

*“As a team, we will meet to discuss how our policies and procedures may be modified to be less distressing for Veterans.”*

## 5 Share and discuss

If possible, share your reflections and goals with colleagues or in a team meeting. Discuss how your organization can collectively improve its support for Veterans with problematic anger. Consider incorporating feedback from Veterans in this process. Learning from others’ experiences and perspectives can provide additional insights and strengthen your approach.



## Working with Peter

Peter attended a peer support group facilitated by Marcus, a Veteran who had experienced and was managing similar struggles with anger. During the session, Marcus noticed Peter was quiet and seemed uncomfortable sharing his experiences. To encourage participation, Marcus began by sharing his own story:

*“I used to feel like every little thing set me off. I’d yell, I’d slam doors — it felt like I was just stuck being angry all the time. But I realized it wasn’t just about what was happening in the moment. It was everything I hadn’t dealt with since leaving the military.”*

Peter gradually started to open up. He shared that he felt like his Family didn’t understand him and how small frustrations would spiral out of control. Marcus responded with empathy:

*“I’ve been there. It’s tough when it feels like no one gets what you’re going through. But I can tell you it’s possible to take control of this, and it starts with small steps.”*

Marcus suggested that Peter set a simple goal for the week: The next time he felt his anger building, he could pause, recognize it and make note of the physiological changes he experienced. Marcus also followed up after the session with a call to check in and encourage Peter to keep attending.

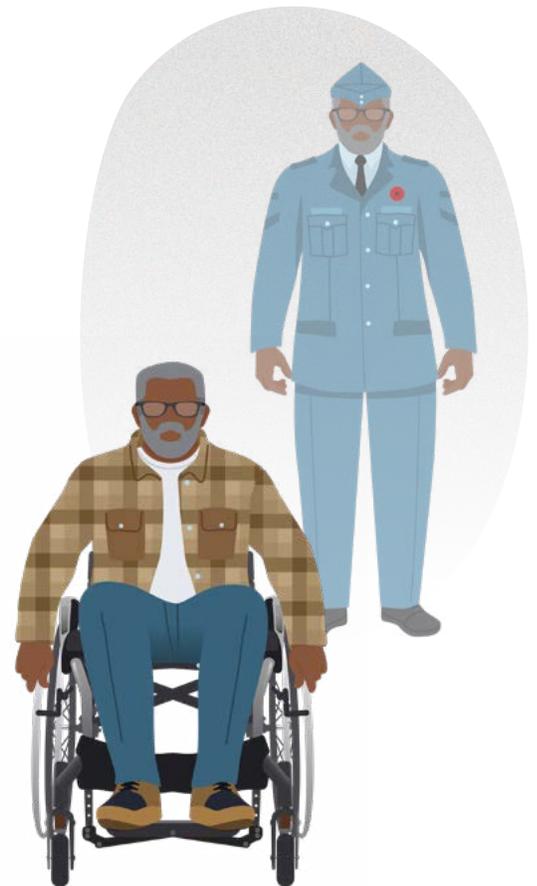
Reflecting on the session, Marcus said:

*“What Veterans need sometimes is someone who’s walked in their shoes. It’s about showing them that change is possible and giving them hope, one step at a time.”*

# Connecting problematic anger to the Canadian Veteran experience

## What you need to know

Veterans’ military training and experiences significantly shape their emotional responses, often fostering behaviours and reactions that are essential for survival in combat, but are less effective in post-service life. Anger – which may have been a functional tool during military service – can become maladaptive, causing Veterans to feel misunderstood and struggle with adjusting to new roles and expectations. As someone working in services supporting Veterans, understanding how these unique experiences influence anger is critical for providing appropriate and effective support.



### **VETERAN VOICE**

*Anger has been a tool. Someone rockets your camp, you should get angry. And we might actually harness that anger for good use in a bit. But then what happens when you're left out of the parent-teacher interviews, when people just don't invite you over anymore, when the kids suddenly are inviting their friends by less — that's not a good sign.*

— Brian, CAF Veteran

## Key influences on Veterans' anger

### • Training

Military training can influence some Veterans (depending on their trade) to rely on hypervigilance and aggression as protective mechanisms, which are essential in potentially life-threatening environments. These responses, while critical in combat, are often out of place in everyday civilian settings. Veterans may become frustrated or conflicted when their adherence to military norms such as discipline and hierarchy clash with the more informal and flexible civilian environment.

### • Trauma and moral injury

Exposure to life-threatening events, moral injury (violations of deeply held ethical beliefs — see our moral injury topic page for more information: [atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury](https://atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury)) or personal loss can heighten Veterans' emotional reactivity. Traumatic memories may unexpectedly trigger intense emotional distress — which can include anger — even in situations where no immediate threat is present. For some, the unresolved tension from these events perpetuates a cycle of distress and anger expression.

### • Transition stress

Veterans frequently report a profound sense of loss when leaving the military. They may struggle with a diminished sense of identity, purpose or camaraderie and face difficulties adjusting to civilian systems. Misunderstandings or frustrations in post-service life, such as feeling undervalued or encountering bureaucratic hurdles, can compound irritability and anger.



### Maria's journey

Maria, a 35-year-old Veteran, excelled during her service as a logistics officer, managing high-pressure operations with precision and authority. However, since transitioning to post-service life, she has struggled with intense anger that she feels unable to control. Her anger is often triggered by small frustrations, such as a missed deadline at work or a disagreement with her partner. Maria says:

***“In the military, everything was clear — orders, structure, what needed to be done. Out here, I feel like I’m constantly misunderstood and it just builds until I explode. It just pushes people away.”***

Her anger frequently leads to shouting matches at work, alienating her colleagues or emotional withdrawal at home, leaving her feeling isolated. Maria recognizes the impact her anger has on her relationships and career, but she feels unsure how to address it.

## Reflection exercise

# Extending your understanding of problematic anger in the Canadian Veteran experience

## 1 Reflect on Veterans' training and responses

Think about Veterans you have supported or interacted with in your role. Consider the following questions:

- **Training:** How might their military training and conditioning influence their emotional and behavioural responses in post-service life?
  - Have you observed signs of hypervigilance or a need for structure that seemed to clash with civilian systems?
  - How did their responses affect their ability to engage with the services or support you provided?
  - What skills does the Veteran have as a result of their military training (e.g. tactical breathing, de-escalation) that they could apply when managing their anger?
- **Trauma and moral injury:** Have you encountered situations where a Veteran's anger seemed connected to unresolved trauma or moral injury?
  - Were there specific triggers – such as reminders of past experiences or perceived ethical violations – that seemed to escalate their anger?
  - How did this influence their willingness to ask for or accept support?
- **Transition stress:** How might feelings of loss – identity, purpose, camaraderie – have contributed to a Veteran's irritability and/or frustration?
  - Did they express frustration with civilian systems or relationships? How did this impact their engagement with available resources?

## 2 Plan for action

Using your reflections and considering the questions below, identify one or two strategies you can implement to better support Veterans experiencing problematic anger.

- How can you validate the challenges Veterans face in adapting their military training to post-service life?
- What steps can you take to create a more understanding and empathetic environment for Veterans experiencing trauma, moral injury or transition stress?
- How can you address transition stress by acknowledging the loss of identity and purpose, and help Veterans rebuild these aspects in post-service life?
- How can you explore with the Veteran the skills they might have that could assist them in addressing their anger?



### 3 Apply and share

Commit to one specific action you will take in your role to enhance support for Veterans dealing with problematic anger. For example:

*“I will practise recognizing how military training influences Veterans’ responses and tailor my communication to reflect their need for structure.”*

*“I will approach Veterans’ anger with greater awareness of how it may be connected to trauma or moral injury, offering reassurance and understanding.”*

Share your reflections and planned actions with a colleague or team member. Discuss how your organization can better address the unique experiences of Canadian Veterans and create more effective support systems.

## Supporting Maria

Maria was referred to Luc, an occupational therapist specializing in Veteran mental health, through her workplace wellness program. Luc focused on creating a supportive environment, starting their first session by saying:

*“Maria, I understand it’s not easy to talk about this, but I’m here to help you find strategies that can help make things easier for you.”*

As Maria discussed her frustrations at work, Luc noticed her becoming tense. He suggested:

*“Let’s take a moment and try a grounding exercise to reset.”*

Luc helped Maria reduce tension and continue the conversation by guiding her through a calm breathing exercise. They developed a straightforward plan to manage her anger, which included using grounding techniques during tense moments, taking short breaks when she felt overwhelmed and reflecting on triggers through journaling. Luc encouraged her by saying:

*“These small steps can help you take back control, one situation at a time.”*

This practical and empathetic approach empowered Maria to start addressing her anger constructively, improving her interactions at work and at home.

➤ See the [exercise section](#) for some strategies that can be shared with Veteran clients to help manage challenging emotions.

# De-escalation strategies for in-the-moment responses

## What you need to know

De-escalation strategies focus on diffusing anger *before* it escalates into harmful behaviours or strained relationships. These strategies allow Veterans to regain control over their emotions and prevent further tension. A Veteran's anger may escalate rapidly due to military conditioning or trauma-related responses. It may also escalate rapidly given high baseline levels of tension already being experienced. Recognizing early warning signs and responding effectively can make a critical difference in creating a safe and productive interaction.

De-escalation strategies are needed less often when clear boundaries are set early. Establishing expectations around respect and communication helps build trust and prevents unnecessary conflict. When Veterans know what to expect and feel heard, interactions become more cooperative rather than confrontational. A strong foundation reduces the chances of anger-driven moments, making de-escalation a backup rather than a constant need.



### “ VETERAN VOICE ”

→ *The first time I ever got really frustrated with my son was the first time I acknowledged that I had anger in me or the capacity for it... I got really frustrated and didn't know what to do with him. I was just like, 'What's going on right now, like why are you freaking out? I don't understand.' And that wasn't my normal response... so, for me, it was a huge concern... because I didn't understand why I was reacting the way I was.*

– Tabitha, CAF Veteran

## Key de-escalation strategies and examples of language you can use:

<b>1</b> Empathy and validation	Acknowledge and validate the Veteran's emotions without condoning aggressive behaviour. For example:	<i>"I can see why this situation is frustrating for you."</i>
	Avoid judging or labelling the Veteran's behaviour, which may increase defensiveness or escalate anger. For example:	<i>"I want to understand what's happening, not make assumptions about how you're feeling."</i>
<b>2</b> Calm communication	Use a neutral tone, non-confrontational language and relaxed body language. For example:	<i>"Let's take a moment to go over this step by step so we can sort it out together."</i>
	Maintain eye contact if culturally appropriate. Avoid eye contact if it could be seen as threatening or aggressive. For example:	<i>"I'm here to listen and I want to make sure I understand what you need."</i>
	Keep responses simple and direct to reduce the chance of misinterpretation. For example:	<i>"What's most important to you right now? Let's focus on that first."</i>
<b>3</b> Acknowledge feelings	Express understanding of the Veteran's emotional state. For example:	<i>"I hear that this is upsetting for you. Let's talk about what's happening."</i>
	Address underlying emotions that may be camouflaged by anger, such as frustration, shame or fear. For example:	<i>"It sounds like you're feeling really let down by this situation. Let's work on how we can move forward."</i>

4

Create space and time

Encourage a pause or a temporary withdrawal from the situation to allow both parties to cool down. For example:

*“Would you like to step outside for a moment? Sometimes a bit of fresh air helps.”*

Suggest grounding techniques, such as deep-breathing exercises or counting backward from 20. For example:

*“Why don’t we try taking a few slow calm breaths together to reset before we continue?”*

➤ See the [exercise section](#) for some grounding and relaxation strategies.

5

Situational awareness at all times

Recognize early signs of escalation, such as increased agitation, a raised voice or clenched fists. For example:

*“I notice this is becoming really tense. Let’s slow things down and take it one step at a time.”*

Respond proactively by redirecting the conversation or offering grounding techniques, such as the 5-4-3-2-1 method (identify 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell and 1 thing you taste). For example:

*“Let’s take a moment to focus on what’s around us. Can you tell me five things you see right now?”*

## Staying safe: A priority for workers

While de-escalation strategies are designed to reduce tension, it is critical for you to prioritize your own safety in potentially volatile situations.

### ■ Maintain awareness of the environment

- Position yourself near an exit if possible and avoid being cornered in a space. However, be mindful that trauma-exposed Veterans can also feel anxious if they're not near an exit or if they have something blocking their access, so try and create safe spaces for both.
- Remove or secure items that could be used as weapons in the immediate environment.

### ■ Keep boundaries

- Clearly state unacceptable behaviours while maintaining a calm tone. For example:

***“I want to help, but I need us to speak respectfully to move forward.”***

### ■ Know when to step away

- If the situation escalates beyond verbal aggression, prioritize leaving the environment and seeking assistance.
- Alert security or involve authorities if you feel unsafe or threatened.

### ■ Debrief after incidents

- Share experiences with a supervisor or a peer to process the event and evaluate the effectiveness of the response.
- Use these discussions to identify additional strategies for future situations.



## De-escalating with Mark

Mark, a Veteran who often struggles with anger outbursts, arrived at the support centre visibly agitated. A misunderstanding with his benefits application had left him feeling frustrated and powerless. As he entered the centre, his body language immediately signalled his distress: his fists were clenched, his voice was raised and he paced back and forth across the room. Mark yelled:

***“This whole system is screwed. No one cares about what we’re going through. What’s the point of asking for help if no one listens?”***

Mark’s frustration was obvious and his escalating behaviour reflected both his anger and his underlying feelings of being unheard and unsupported.

## Reflection exercise and skills-building practice

# Enhancing your use of de-escalation strategies

### Reflection exercise

Think about a time in your work when de-escalation strategies might have been useful. Perhaps an interaction became tense or you noticed signs of frustration escalating into anger. Consider how you responded and what you might have done differently.

*Was there a moment when using a de-escalation strategy could have changed the course of the interaction? What approach might have helped reduce tension and create a more constructive conversation?*

### Skills practice

Go to the [exercise section](#) at the end of this guide and select at least one de-escalation strategy to practise. Choose one that might have been useful in the situation you reflected on. Try applying this strategy in a low-stakes setting or role-play it with a colleague to build your confidence in using it when needed.



### Aurelie's response

Recognizing the early signs of escalation, Aurelie immediately used de-escalation techniques to calm the situation. Maintaining a neutral tone and steady presence, she approached Mark with empathy.

*"Mark, I can see you're frustrated and I want to help. Let's take a moment to figure this out together."*

Aurelie's calm communication acknowledged Mark's emotions without condoning his behaviour. As Mark's tension continued to build, Aurelie suggested,

*"Why don't we both take a moment? Maybe step outside for some fresh air and then we can work through this together."*

Mark hesitated but agreed, stepping outside for a few moments and taking deep breaths with her encouragement. Mark returned calmer and ready to address the issue constructively with Aurelie's support. Later, Aurelie said:

*"It's about creating a space where they feel heard and supported without letting the situation escalate further. Sometimes, giving them a moment to reset is all it takes to move forward."*

# Working alongside Veterans to find support

## What you need to know

Asking for help can be difficult for Veterans, as many perceive it as a sign of weakness or failure, a mindset reinforced by military training that emphasizes self-reliance and emotional control. This reluctance often leads to avoidance of support services, even when problematic anger impacts their relationships, mental health or ability to engage with services. Professionals have a vital role in addressing these barriers, normalizing asking for support help- and creating pathways that empower Veterans to access the support they need.

## Key support strategies

- **Normalize asking for help**
  - Reassure Veterans that experiencing problematic anger is common and treatable.
  - Emphasize that asking for support is not a sign of weakness, but a demonstration of strength and resilience. Use relatable examples or success stories to challenge stigma.
- **Encourage reflection**
  - Depending on your role, guide Veterans in exploring how anger impacts their relationships, work and well-being.
- **Enhance motivation**
  - Frame asking for help as a proactive step toward regaining control and improving quality of life.
  - Share positive outcomes from other Veterans who have sought help, highlighting their successes to inspire confidence.
- **Provide accessible resources**
  - Offer clear and easy-to-use information about programs, crisis lines, support groups and therapeutic services.
  - Tailor resource recommendations to individual needs and preferences, ensuring they are relevant and accessible.

### VETERAN VOICE

*Therapy is a really big thing in terms of managing my problematic anger, because I can tap into a safe environment. It feels more controlled. Finding safe places to experience my emotions really helps.*

– Tabitha, CAF Veteran





## Moving forward with Tom

Tom, a 46-year-old Veteran, served in a leadership role during multiple deployments. Known for his calmness under pressure and his decisiveness, Tom found transitioning to post-service life difficult. He often felt overwhelmed by minor challenges and described himself as “constantly on edge.” His anger would erupt unexpectedly, whether over discovering he had missed a bill payment or a disagreement with his spouse.

Tom explains:

***“In the field, I had control. Everything was clear. Out here, it’s just chaos — no order, no respect. I get angry, but I don’t know how to stop it.”***

Tom’s anger had begun to strain his relationships. His Family avoided discussing sensitive topics and he isolated himself from friends, believing they wouldn’t understand. Although he recognized the toll his anger was taking, Tom resisted getting help, viewing it as an admission of failure.

## Exercise

### Barriers and bridges to help

#### 1 Reflect on barriers

What makes it difficult for Veterans to ask for help? Common barriers may include stigma, fear of judgment or lack of information about available resources.

#### 2 Identify bridges

What could make asking for support easier? Can these strategies be implemented in your workplace? Examples include peer recommendations, relatable success stories or accessible resources with clear steps.

#### 3 Plan a first step

Encourage Veterans to identify one concrete action they can take this week to move closer to getting support, such as calling a crisis line or attending a local peer support group meeting.

#### 4 Team operational debrief

- Share insights from the activity with colleagues to discuss how to address barriers and strengthen enablers within the organization.
- By reducing stigma, enhancing motivation and providing accessible resources, professionals can empower Veterans to take meaningful steps toward managing anger and improving their overall well-being.



## Sophie's response

Tom was referred to Sophie, a case manager at Veterans Affairs Canada, after his wife encouraged him to get support. When Sophie spoke with Tom over the phone, she focused on normalizing the process, saying,

***“Tom, reaching out isn’t about weakness. It’s about using your strength to take care of yourself and your Family.”***

As they talked, Sophie guided Tom to reflect on how his anger affected his life. She asked.

***“What happens when you get angry? How does it impact the people around you?”***

Tom’s voice was heavy over the line as he admitted feeling ashamed and disconnected after his outbursts.

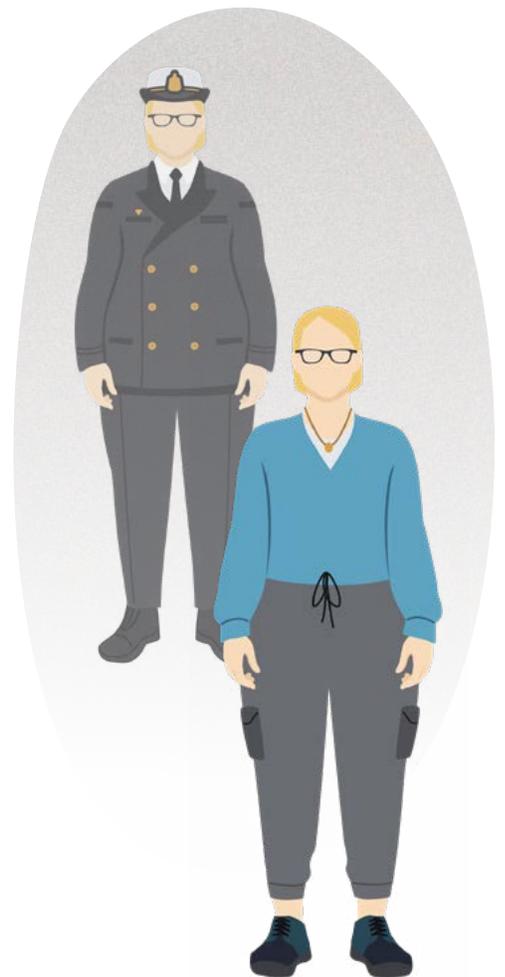
Sophie provided tailored resources to support Tom, including a Veteran-specific anger management program and a crisis line, emphasizing flexible options such as virtual sessions. She also shared a success story of another Veteran to inspire confidence, saying,

***“He told me it wasn’t easy, but it gave him the tools to rebuild his relationships.”***

Sophie suggested a small first step before the call ended:

***“This week, how about looking into one of these programs or calling the crisis line? No commitment, just explore.”***

Tom took a deep breath before responding and, though hesitant, he agreed to consider it. This approach helped him feel supported and ready to begin his journey toward managing his anger and reconnecting with his Family.



# Continue learning

The information and advice in this guide provide a foundation for understanding and supporting Veterans with problematic anger. However, this is just a starting point. Exploring additional resources and training can be invaluable for those interested in expanding their knowledge and skills. Consider enrolling in short courses that offer the opportunity to gain deeper insights and practical tools that will enhance your ability to support Veterans effectively and confidently.

# Final thoughts

Through this guide, you've explored the complexities of problematic anger in Veterans and gained practical strategies to navigate these challenges in your work. You've learned how to recognize the triggers and manifestations of anger, connecting them to the unique experiences Veterans bring from their military service. You've examined ways to de-escalate tense situations with empathy and care. You now have tools to encourage Veterans to take meaningful steps toward getting the support they need.

These insights and techniques are designed to enhance your understanding and confidence as you engage with Veterans. By applying what you've learned, you can help create safe, supportive spaces where Veterans feel understood and empowered to manage their anger constructively. Each step you take, whether through calm communication, validating their experiences or providing resources, contributes to fostering trust and enabling positive change in their lives.

Your role in supporting Veterans is not just important – it's invaluable. The work you do has the potential to transform lives, by helping Veterans navigate their challenges and find pathways to recovery and fulfilment. Thank you for your commitment, your empathy and your dedication to making a difference.

Learn more about how problematic anger can affect Veterans and their Families by listening to a thoughtful podcast conversation with the Atlas Institute's Brian McKenna, Laryssa Lamrock and Polliann Maher. They share personal insights and reflections that bring real-life experience to the topic.

**LISTEN NOW**

[atlasveterans.ca/mbtm-when-does-anger-become-problematic](https://atlasveterans.ca/mbtm-when-does-anger-become-problematic)



This handout provides a simple yet effective tool for managing escalating emotions and refocusing attention. Regular practice can help both service providers and Veterans build confidence in their ability to navigate these tense situations and foster calmer, more constructive interactions.

## Grounding practice: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 countdown

This exercise will help you to bring some or all of your senses into the present moment. Take a calming breath between each item you see, touch, hear, smell or taste. Feel free to create your own list or use some of the following items as a guide.



**5** things you can see

*clouds in the sky, trees, birds, a specific colour around you, your hands*



**4** things you can touch or feel

*a table, the ground, the sun on your skin, a pet's soft fur*



**3** things you can hear

*laughter, cars going by, your own breathing*



**2** things you can smell

*fresh cut grass, a candle*

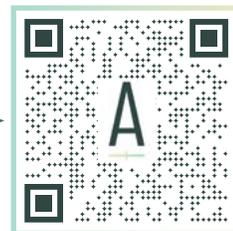


**1** thing you can taste

*a cup of tea*

FIND MORE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES ON PROBLEMATIC ANGER:

[atlasveterans.ca/problematic-anger](https://atlasveterans.ca/problematic-anger)



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## Box breathing

Trauma affects your fight/flight/freeze responses, known as the sympathetic nervous system. Deep breathing can be a very useful strategy to calm this response. Deep breathing activates the “rest” response, or the parasympathetic nervous system, which can signal to your body that you are safe. This is particularly true if you focus on a nice long out breath.

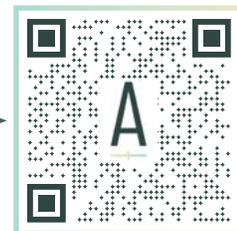
### Try this breathing technique:

- 1 Pause and focus on your breathing.
- 2 Inhale deeply through your nose for four seconds.
- 3 Hold your breath for four seconds.
- 4 Exhale slowly through your mouth for four seconds.
- 5 Hold again for four seconds before starting the next breath.
- 6 Repeat three to four times, noticing your body gradually relaxing.



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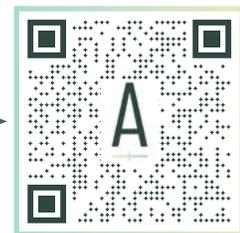
### Progressive muscle relaxation

Trauma affects your fight/flight/freeze responses, known as the sympathetic nervous system. Deep breathing can be a very useful strategy to calm this response. Deep breathing activates the “rest” response, or the parasympathetic nervous system, which can signal to your body that you are safe. This is particularly true if you focus on a nice long out breath.

- 1 Pause and focus on your breathing.
- 2 Tense a muscle group (e.g. fists, shoulders or legs) for five seconds.
- 3 Release the tension and notice the sensation of relaxation.
- 4 Move to another muscle group, tensing for five seconds and then releasing.
- 5 Repeat with different areas of the body, working from head to toe or vice versa.
- 6 Repeat the process as often as necessary.

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**ATLAS  
INSTITUTE**  
FOR VETERANS AND FAMILIES

## ABOUT THE ATLAS INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND FAMILIES

The Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families works with Veterans, Families, service providers and researchers to bridge the divide between research and practice so Veterans and their Families can get the best possible mental health care and supports. The Atlas Institute was originally established as the Centre of Excellence on PTSD and Related Mental Health Conditions, through the Minister of Veterans Affairs.



**Phoenix**  
A U S T R A L I A

CENTRE FOR  
POSTTRAUMATIC  
MENTAL HEALTH

## ABOUT PHOENIX AUSTRALIA

Phoenix Australia (formerly the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health) promotes recovery for the 15 million Australians affected by trauma. Phoenix Australia works with individuals, organizations and the community to understand, prevent and recover from the potential adverse effects of trauma. Phoenix Australia is an independent not-for-profit organization that is affiliated with the University of Melbourne.



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