



“I need a calmer life—now!”

In just 7 days
we can
help you keep
your cool
no matter what
your husband, your
kids, or the
auto mechanic
dishes out.

BY KAREN J. BANNAN

My mother is a very caring, compassionate woman with a bad habit: She yells. As a result, I spent many years listening to her scream. She yelled when we spilled our milk, when we didn't pick up our toys—you name it. And when I was 10 years old, I swore to myself that I'd never yell when I grew up.

Today I'm ashamed to admit that while my childhood intentions were good, my adult follow-through is pretty lousy. I found out the hard way: Yelling is a learned behavior, a habit I'm still desperately trying to break. I'm reminded of that fact every time I catch myself screaming at my husband for something minor. And I'm not alone. Women all over the country—friends, family, colleagues—have told me how guilty they feel about yelling fits they've had in front of their children, husbands, friends, and coworkers.

We yell for a variety of reasons, says Tina B. Tessina, a psychologist and

author of *It Ends With You: Grow Up and Out of Dysfunction*. “It really runs the gamut, but many people yell because they get frustrated or they feel as if they're not being heard,” she says. “It's a habit, but one that can be broken.”

And faster than you think. We've consulted the top anger-management experts around the country to come up with what we call “yelling rehab”: a plan that will help you lower your decibel level within a week.

DAY 1

DO A YELLING REALITY CHECK

One reason yelling becomes a habit is that the anger and aggression you feel are part of a vicious cycle, says Raymond W. Novaco, Ph.D., a professor in the department of psychology and social behavior at the University of California, Irvine. Yelling is reinforcing: The more you yell, the more it feels like a normal outlet for you, so you're likely to do it again and again.

Boiling over is also habit-forming because, the truth is, you're probably getting something out of your rants. For example, you may feel that yelling empowers you or helps you get your way. You may also see it as a way to become closer to someone, such as when you roar at your husband and make up afterward. That's why part of today's task is to clarify *why* you want to stop yelling by listing both the positive and the negative repercussions of giving it up, says Jerry Deffenbacher, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Colorado State University.

Part two of your yelling reality check is to keep an anger log: Write down every time you lose your cool today and include where you were, what made you upset, and how intense your anger was on a scale of one to ten (one being mildly annoyed and ten being enraged), suggests Meryl Runion, an expert in communications and conflict management and author of several books on relationships. Also include the duration—how long you *stayed* mad—since the longer you hold on to anger, the more it affects other aspects of your life. Although making a list may sound pretty basic, just being more aware of your habit and knowing that you're holding yourself accountable for it can help you start quelling your rage immediately.

DAY 2

RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS

Now that you've had a little time away from your anger log, take a good look at it. You'll probably see a pattern right away. Are there specific times of the day or particular situations in which you often get upset? Are you yelling only at your family? Do you tend to explode a lot when you're in the car, a common place for aggression? Recognizing these triggers will help you tame your temper, because when you know which situations are apt to set you off, it's easier to react to them without all the fireworks, says Deffenbacher.

For instance, I noticed I yell a lot when people let me down, such as when my husband forgets to let me know he's coming home late and when friends don't return my calls. Novaco

says this is common and happens because I, like many other women, tend to interpret a letdown as a lack of respect or love.

Another key way to anticipate a meltdown so you can head it off at the pass is to heed its *physical* warning signs, says Michael S. Broder, a psychologist and author of *Can Your Relationship Be Saved? How to Know Whether to Stay or Go*. When you get angry, your blood pressure rises, along with your heart rate. Your breathing becomes shallow and fast. You may start to sweat or shake. The muscles in your hands may tighten into fists, or your shoulders may tense up. So the next time you get angry today, note the signals your body is sending. Says Tracy Kerievsky, a San Francisco mom: "I feel my shoulders tighten right away, and sometimes I even start to shake or feel a pain in my gut. That's when I know I'm about to explode."

DAY 3

LEARN TO TAKE A BREATH

So how do you put the red flags you identified above to work for you? Use them as cues to take a break from the situation. This can be as simple as giving yourself a few seconds to think—something experts call inserting

a pause—between your angry feelings and your response. When you're about to blow up at your husband or kids, for instance, count to ten or close your eyes and just relax for a moment. At the office you'll of course have to be more discreet (say, by taking four deep breaths; disguise them as a couple of yawns if need be). Or you can even feign a cough.

Another option is to politely excuse yourself and walk away from your potential anger target for a few minutes. You can even gently make reference to the tension in the air, as in "I think we should step away from the situation for a moment," says Deffenbacher. Use that time away to give yourself a pep talk, he says. "Think to yourself, This is not the end of the world. I'm a good person who did a good job of not blowing up. I can handle this situation." Then, when you're feeling calmer, you can go back and find your foe.

A friend of mine—a mother of two girls, aged 5 and 10—says taking a

break really helps when her kids get rambunctious. "One afternoon after getting off an important telephone call, I walked downstairs to check on the

kids," she recalls. "It turned out that they had set up a beauty salon and were hard at work trimming each other's bangs. I was shocked and furious. I turned around, walked away, and locked myself in the bathroom until I knew I'd be able to speak to them without shrieking. I was still very angry when I came out about ten minutes

later, but at least I wasn't yelling and screaming as I dragged them to the neighborhood Hair Cuttery to repair the damage."

You can also insert a pause *before* you head into a situation that you've learned is likely to set you off. For instance, if you're about to meet with a coworker who you know brings out the worst in you, take a moment to tell yourself: "If her goal is to unnerve me, boy, is she going to have a tough job. If I start to lose it, I'll just reschedule our meeting. Bottom line: I can keep my act together."

To make yourself heard—without yelling—try a little humor.

5 Quirky Anger Tamers That Work

- **BE A LITTLE SILLY** How? Get literal. "If I'm thinking you're a horse's ass and I visualize you as one, it's hard to stay angry with that funny image in my head," says psychology expert Deffenbacher. So before you blurt out a mean name or a nasty accusation, think about what you're actually saying. Ready to call your husband a slob? Picture him as Charlie Brown's friend Pig Pen. Is your boss a bitch? Imagine what she'd look like if you put her face on the body of a golden retriever.
- **SMELL LAVENDER OIL** Several studies have shown that this simple act can lower blood pressure, heart rate, and agitation level. You can find the oil at most health-food stores or at Aveda or The Body Shop stores.
- **PLAN TO WATCH A COMEDY TONIGHT** Laughter reduces stress and anger, but even *thinking* about the prospect of laughter later in the day can stop negative feelings in their tracks. In fact, researchers at the University of California, Irvine College of Medicine say people who anticipate a funny event can instantly reduce the levels of stress hormones in their systems.
- **GET A PET** People in stressful situations have lower heart rates and blood pressure when a pet is in the room with them, according to a recent study at the State University of New York at Buffalo.
- **SING OUT LOUD** Breaking into song can help push negative feelings away, according to a University of London study. People who sing reduce stress and increase energy almost instantly. Sure, you can't belt out a tune during a meeting, but singing along as you crank up the radio in your car or in the kitchen is a great alternative. Karaoke, anyone?

DAY 4

FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND—NOT ON YOUR FEELINGS

Congratulations. You've got the basics down. Now it's time to go deeper, by zeroing in on what you're trying to *achieve* when you're ready to roar—whether it's getting your kid to pick up her toys or making your mother-in-law understand that she should call before dropping in—instead of focusing on your feelings. Novaco says that this cool-headed, task-oriented approach will help you get what you want better than a shriekfest will, since most people tune out yellers anyway. So today when you want to make yourself heard, go ahead and insert one of those pauses you learned about yesterday, and use the time to think about what you want to get out of the situation before you jump into it mouth-first.

Sara Otepka, a project manager in Boulder, Colorado, says she uses this

calmer life

(continued)

technique whenever she can. "Recently it's really been bothering me how much my husband swears," she explains. "Not long ago when he dropped some dishes on the floor, I heard a string of swear words come out of his mouth. So I yelled back, 'Damn it, Matt, would you calm down and stop swearing!' I quickly realized the irony there and how counterproductive my actions were and calmly said to him, 'Honey, your cursing is really bothering me. Can we talk about how you can stop?' We decided that he would pay 50 cents every time he used a curse word."

DAY 5

THINK ABOUT ALTERNATIVES

You're almost there. Yesterday you learned how to focus on what you want. The next step of the plan is to find a way to let others know that—minus the screaming.

Here's your chance to get creative (with a little humor). Says Kristen Thistle, a Minneapolis public relations practitioner: "I get so frustrated when I come home and the morning's coffeepot is still unwashed or when my husband's clothes are strewn all over. I feel my blood start to boil, but then I take a step back and think, He probably had to leave in a hurry and didn't have time to pick up his clothes. Instead of yelling at him to get my point across, I'll feign tripping over the clothes piled up on the floor. He gets my drift in a nonthreatening manner, and the clothes get picked up." (For other creative ways to short-circuit a pending meltdown, see "5 Quirky Anger Tamers That Work," page 120.)

Or try to see the constructive opportunity in a given situation. For example, yelling at your 3-year-old for leaving his toys lying around isn't logical, since most children this age can't always remember to clean up. But helping him put his plastic dinosaur collection away gives you more time to be with him and helps reinforce a positive habit. By thinking about alternatives, says Tessina, you're training your mind to sidestep your yelling habit and establish a new one.

Do a dry run of today's rehab step by practicing your alternatives in front

of a mirror. "Replay in your mind conversations you've had where you started yelling, then practice handling them differently and staying calm," says Tessina. Talk out loud and listen to what you sound like. And be very aware of your nonverbal language, too: You may *sound* calm, but if you're pointing or frowning, you're still engaging in a form of yelling.

DAY 6

GET YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY IN ON THE ACTION

Even the best habit-breaking plan can benefit from a support system. That's why starting today, you're going to give your friends and family permission to help you maintain your resolve, says Novaco. So devise a code word—one that means something to you, such as your favorite color or your childhood pet's name—that they can use when you start to lose control. Just hearing this little anti-yelling reminder will help you take a step back, interrupt any instinctive urges to scream, and stick with the program.

DAY 7

REWARD YOURSELF

There's no greater reward than success. Now that you're starting to anticipate your yelling fits and prevent them, keep tabs on how many times you turn a potential yelling episode into a constructive opportunity.

Whenever you avoid raising your voice, you've succeeded. Your feelings may be your best reward. Be aware of how calm, proud, or excited you feel when you talk to someone without raising your voice. Even more important, watch how people respond to you. Your husband, like mine, may start calling home earlier when he knows he's going to be late if you calmly remind him that his carelessness makes you upset. Even if he doesn't—and he may not, since his forgetfulness probably has nothing to do with the way he feels about you—you're not sabotaging your relationship or raising your blood pressure unnecessarily.

And don't rule out giving yourself material rewards, such as some new aromatherapy bath oil, a funny book, and a pampering pedicure. After all, a little treat beats a meltdown any day. □