Anger wells up within us whenever we perceive that we have been wronged, but how we deal with the situation will determine whether the problem escalates or is resolved. Here are 10 ways to resolve a toxic situation:

1. Take a deep breath… and wait
Breathing calms the body, and by reducing the physical signs of anger, calms the mind. When something has angered you, rather than erupting spontaneously, or sending off an angry letter or email, breathe deeply and then exhale – and the exhalation should be longer and more complete than the in-breath (say, in for seven seconds and out for 10). Repeat this several times. Wait until you are physically calm. Only then should you express yourself. If you cannot reach a state of calm, consider what benefit you are trying to get out of the situation, and take measured, considered action which does not include ranting or sending an invective-filled or vitriolic email or letter which can only inflame and worsen the already fraught state of affairs.

2. Don’t deny your anger, but consider the consequences
Anger should not be suppressed. Doing so and storing it only builds up to a more explosive eruption later. Rather use it and lose it. Anger can be used appropriately or inappropriately. It is appropriate when you use it to achieve a desired outcome. It is inappropriate when the anger uses you, takes over and brings about an unconsidered and unwanted outcome. Think about poor service on an airline: don’t explode at the hostess – ranting and raving will just annoy other passengers and may just get you barred from using that airline in future – rather call the senior purser and voice your complaint in a measured way and you are likely to be offered a better meal, an upgrade, or air-miles.

3. Eat properly… and drink sensibly
Healthy, but not excessive eating, drinking lots of water, enjoying tea, coffee and alcohol but not in excess are all sensible responses to irrational emotion or tiredness. They may also prevent and control stress headaches.

4. Recognise tiredness and stress
One of the most common places we recognise that we are tired and/or stressed is in a car. This is where most arguments between spouses or companions occur. The trigger may be not following the best route, heavy traffic or the poor control of another driver. The consequences of losing your temper may be an insufferable journey or, worse, an accident. You might injure someone, kill or be killed. Rather breathe deeply and wait. Above all, do not drive when tired. Tiredness and stress are equally damaging at work and at home. Rather than get embroiled in a major argument, say you are upset and walk away.

5. Control your environment
As anger specialist Mike Fisher says, ‘Anger thrives in a toxic environment, feeding on itself. If you manage to stay calm at work or in a car, other people will be less stressed and angry, which will in turn help you to control your own anger’. The dental practice environment – working on a tiny cavity on a small object in a small mouth in a small room – is unfortunately not conducive to relaxation, but can be controlled by having good equipment, lighting and ventilation and improving the local ambiance.

6. Anger as a justified response to wrong-doing should be proportionate
There are times and situations when it is completely appropriate to be angry, but when for example, one goes into a rant because one’s employee has spilled a bottle of varnish, this is disproportionate.
On the other hand, becoming apoplectic at the spillage of a bottle of mercury is by no means unjustified!

7. Focus on the issue rather than on the person
When we are angry it is easy to use terms like ‘you always get things wrong when you speak to patients’, but this tends to bring about a response like ‘no, I don’t always, just in this case, but you always say always!’ Focusing on the issue, like ‘Mrs Jones was upset – do you think you could have handled her in a different way?’ will produce a very different and less emotional response.

8. Get help
If one is in a persistently stressed and angry state to the detriment of one’s health, well-being, and relationships with others, it is eminently sensible to seek help from a doctor, therapist or coach. Help may come in the form of advice, medication or suggestion for lifestyle change, but someone else is far more likely to see the bigger picture.

9. Join a support group
Examples would be The British Association of Anger Management or Alcoholics Anonymous, or one’s church, mosque or synagogue. Joining a yoga or tai chi group often provides a nurturing community for dealing with lower-level stress.

10. Take responsibility
A problem may be caused by another person, but until you recognise that the greater problem of your excessive response to a negative situation rests within you rather than with others, you are unlikely to improve the situation. As soon as you start to blame others, focus on your own errors or misconceptions that have clouded the picture, and accept responsibility.

It’s in your mind and in your hands!

Adrienne Morris is a highly trained success coach whose aim is to get people from where they are now to where they want to be, in clear measured steps.

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Recommended reading: Beating Anger by Mike Fisher, director of The British Association of Anger Management.