



Anger and our brains

This booklet helps us understand how our brains work and how we can all learn to keep calm when we're feeling angry.

 @mind

What happens in our brains when we feel angry?



The brain is really complicated and powerful. Everything we think, feel or do starts with the brain. Without it, we couldn't hear, speak, walk, run, laugh, or cry.

But what role does it play in difficult feelings, like anger and anxiety?

It's important to understand what's happening in our brains when we feel angry. We're going to explain why it can sometimes feel as if anger makes us lose control and do things we might regret later.



“I snapped at people, was rude and always angry: at myself, at the world.”



The pre-frontal cortex

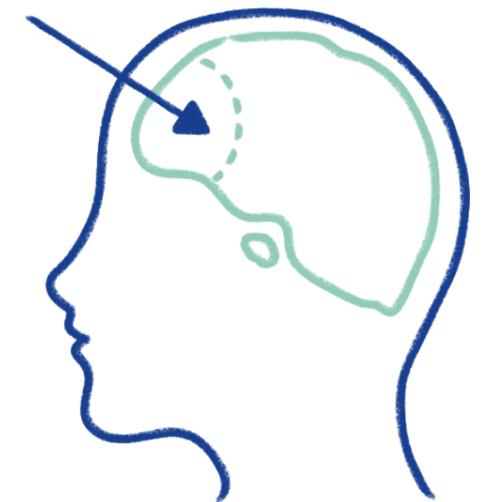
What is it? It's a part of your brain which thinks things through and solves problems. We sometimes call it the **thinking mind**.

Where is it? At the very front of your brain, just behind your forehead, is where you'll find the pre-frontal cortex.

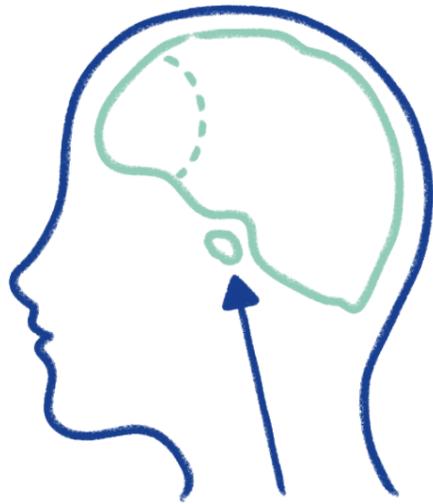
What's it for? The pre-frontal cortex helps you to make decisions. For example, if you want to ask a question in class, it will think "shall I ask this question or not?"

On one hand, asking the question might help you understand the subject better. On the other hand, asking the question might show the teacher that you weren't listening. Your pre-frontal cortex helps you decide what's best for you to do – it all happens in the split second before you put your hand up.

Your pre-frontal cortex continues to develop until you're 25. So even if you don't feel good at these things yet, you'll keep learning how to solve problems and make positive decisions.



The amygdala



What is it? It's a part of your brain that's important when it comes to strong emotions, like anger, fear and anxiety. It's pronounced "a-mig-duh-la". We sometimes call it the **fear centre**.

Where is it? It's found deep within the centre of the brain. While it's a small part shaped like an almond, it is very powerful.

What's it for? Normally, the amygdala stays in the background as your pre-frontal cortex gets on with thinking things through and helping you make decisions. But the amygdala takes over when something brings on a really strong feeling, like fear, anxiety or anger.

When it takes over, it's responsible for helping your body react to danger. Instead of calmly thinking things through, the amygdala makes you react to the danger, like running to safety if you saw a dangerous animal in the wild. This happens right away, without giving you time to think about what might happen afterwards.

“Gaining an understanding of my triggers really helped me manage my anger.”



How do these parts of the brain make us react with anger?

As we mentioned, the amygdala takes over in response to strong feelings. Anger is a feeling that's often linked with fear and anxiety – **all very strong feelings**.

When we start to feel a little bit angry, our brains sense that something bad is happening. The amygdala, the **fear centre**, takes over from the pre-frontal cortex, **the thinking mind**. It makes us start doing things immediately, without thinking things through.

If you were fighting a bear to save yourself, that might be useful. But the amygdala can make us react like we're in serious danger, even if we're angry about something small in everyday life.

Because of this, you might fight back without thinking. This means when you feel angry, you might say horrible things or react in a physical way. Things you'll come to regret later.



“In a world that is so full of negativity, it's easy to feel overcome with anger. But there is support out there!”

Taking control of your feelings

You can usually sense if your amygdala is taking over when:

- Your heart start to beat faster
- Your muscles start to get more tense
- You might feel as though blood is rushing to your head

When this happens, the important thing is trying to put your **thinking mind**, the pre-frontal cortex, back in control.

Breathing deeply can help you get back in control, try this:

- 1** In your head, say **STOP!** to yourself.
- 2** Take a deep breath in, then hold it for a couple of seconds.
- 3** Breathe out deeply again, trying to relax your shoulders as you do.
- 4** Repeat this a couple of times, until you no longer feel the need to react without thinking.
- 5** Once you feel a little more relaxed, your pre-frontal cortex should be back in control. Now you can think through whether to react right away, or take some time out and react to the situation later.



This is called the **emergency STOP technique**.
You can find a longer version of it in our **About anger** booklet – just ask your practitioner if you don't have a copy.

“Don't bottle it up, or push your anger to the side. Because it will build up and you will eventually explode. Deal with your anger little by little – breathing exercises, writing down how you feel, venting to a friend.”



We're Mind.

We understand mental health and wellbeing.
We're here if you need us for support and advice.
We help everyone understand mental health
problems, so no one has to feel alone.

Mind

2 Redman Place
London
E20 1JQ
020 8519 2122

contact@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk

t @MindCharity

f [Facebook.com/mindforbettermentalhealth](https://www.facebook.com/mindforbettermentalhealth)

i @mindcharity

