

Are you a good anger manager?

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Three quarters of Irish workers admit to blowing their tops due to the stresses of the workplace. Erin McCafferty reports.

Is your workplace a haven of tranquility? If the answer is 'no', you might be comforted to know that you're not alone. The majority of people in Ireland, according to a recent survey find themselves affected by 'work rage'. Either they get angry themselves or they're on the receiving of someone else's frustration.

A poll by Mental Health Ireland last month found that 70pc of Irish workers experience work rage. Shouting abuse at fellow employees, roaring and losing of your temper are common practices. "If this is a new phenomenon it would certainly be a cause of concern for us," said Brian Howard, CEO of Mental Health Ireland.

"If it is representative of the entire country there is something pretty wrong there, that needs to be addressed. There would be a concern for the well-being of individuals if people regularly experience shouting and yelling in the workplace."

The study of 1,149 workers found that 74pc admitted to having lost their temper at work. Nine out of 10 blamed it on co-workers who were not pulling their weight. Some 68pc of all respondents said verbal and yelling abuse was common practice. It's not a pretty picture and one which modern Ireland clearly needs to address, but is it any wonder when most of us are overly stressed anyway?

Picture the scene: the alarm clock rings at 6.30am, you'd give anything to roll over and sleep for another hour, but you can't. Getting up wearily, you dress the kids, give them breakfast, get on the road, drop them off at the crèche/school and face the daily grind of sitting in traffic, pulling out your hair with frustration. The cars come to standstill as the rain pours down and you turn on the radio only to be told that worse weather is on the way...

When you finally make it into work, caffeine-laden beverage in hand, you're worn out, stressed and grumpy. And the good news is your working day is only beginning. When something goes wrong, as it invariably does, what are you going to do? Sit back, smile and meditate?

No, you're going to take the very human option and release some of that pent up frustration... and God help who happens to be on the receiving end of it.

Robert Mac Giolla Phadraig, associate director of Sigmar Recruitment, which was this year voted the best company to work for in the country, agrees that one of the reasons for work rage is the fact that we are bringing external pressures into the workplace.

“We're living in stressful times with the rising cost of living, longer commuting hours and talk of a down-turn in the economy. You have to get the work/life balance right,” he explains. “At Sigmar we regularly see exactly why people leave jobs.

Besides the external pressures there are also internal ones. For example, the tone of a company is set by those at the top and dictates how people working there communicate with each other. If they are courteous, dignified, respectful and sincere, that is going to filter down to the bottom.

If, however, they're not, you can expect a different type of communication at the lower levels, often leading to work rage, either in person, on the phone or in emails. Sometimes people don't realize they've crossed the line and what is not acceptable has to be explained to them.”

He adds that not all work place aggression is immediately obvious. “Some people are more manipulative and can be aggressive through snide comments and a demanding or patronizing tone, which can be just as harmful,” he said. “Body language and eye contact can be aggressive too.

“Jobs are no longer just a means of survival. People spend much of their life in their workplace and they want it to be an enjoyable experience. They need designated time for relaxing and realistic work loads. Communication between workers is also very important.”

How to avoid losing your cool

- 1.** Recognise that you're stressed and make allowances for it.
- 2.** Don't react immediately when you're angry, take a deep breath and count to 10, smile even if you don't feel like it, and then say what you have to say.
- 3.** Laugh at the situation. Realise that sometimes you've got to laugh or you're going to cry.
- 4.** Replace adrenaline-rush drinks such as caffeine and red bull with something soothing, such as green tea.
- 5.** Always take a lunch break, even if just for half an hour. Get away from the office, go for a walk in the park, do some window shopping, anything to take your mind off work. Avoid all talk of work if you take lunch with your colleagues.

6. Get some exercise. Get up a bit earlier and start your day with a visit to the gym or go at lunchtime. Exercise is the best way to release pent up frustration and balance your mood.

7. Don't take work home with you. When you leave the office, practise switching off.

8. Play classical music in the car on the way to or from work.

'It's essential that we try to balance work with relaxation'

Eleanor O'Carroll, 32, Rathfarnham, Dublin

"As director of studies with a leading language school, I work in a stressful environment where work rage is common.

"I have witnessed people losing their temper on occasion or making snappy comments, but for me it is essential that no matter what is going on, I put on my happy face.

"I try to find other ways of dealing with my stress.

For example I meet friends for lunch, I go the gym after work or I unwind in front of the television.

"It's very important that we finish work at a certain time and leave it behind. I try not to take my work home with me.

"Most of us, these days, lead stressful lives and it's essential that we try to balance work with relaxation.

"Otherwise we can all become prone to work rage which ultimately leads to more stress. It's a vicious circle..."

'If people are unhappy they need to talk about it'

Victoria Cahill, 33, Rathfarnham, Dublin

“What makes me angry in work? Lack of communication is probably the biggest factor. I work as a civil servant for the Department of Finance and I manage a team of three people.

“If there is a lack of understanding between myself and the people below me, or myself and my superiors, it leads to a lack of control. This not only makes me angry, but leads to time wasting in work.”

How can work rage be improved? “If people are unhappy with working practices then they need to talk about it. In the case of the public sector, people can become institutionalised in their role. In my opinion, it’s better that they feel part of a team, rather than thinking they’re being supervised. Ultimately it improves the work ethic and leads to less work rage. The old set-in-stone ranking structure in the civil service needs to be reformed. It is changing, but slowly. It’s becoming a business rather than a pen-pushing exercise.”

‘People who freak out most are those with limited social skills’

Mark Flood, 29, Clondalkin, Dublin

“Working as an animator with a leading Dublin studio for the past four and a half years, I have experienced work rage. It’s quite a stressful job as we’re always working to deadlines.

People can lose their temper when they’re under pressure and it can be difficult to keep cool when you’re up against a deadline or waiting for others to do things or makes decisions.

“I’ve seen people get snappy with each other or lose the head. Sometimes rows happen and colleagues wouldn’t talk to each other for weeks on end.

“Also artists tend to be a sensitive lot and they don’t like to be told something isn’t good enough. My way of handling stress is to step outside, have a few cigarettes and clear my head. But not everyone does the same. I find that the people who freak out the most are the ones with limited social skills.

What can be done to improve work rage? “It’s important for companies to look after the mental welfare of their staff. If someone does a good job for example, they need to be told so afterwards or rewarded in some way.

“It’s important too not to let tension build up between employees and to be organized so that deadlines don’t build up. It boils down to basic manners.”