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The minute his fist went through the wall, Jeff was sorry. He knew it would cost him his job, but he just couldn't stop himself. Or could he? Everyone gets irritated at work sometimes, but people who shout, slam doors, punch walls or threaten co-workers are out of control. Nobody wants to work with a madman (or madwoman, either).

If Jeff went online or picked up a couple of books to learn how to manage his temper, he would learn he is supposed to take a deep breath, count to ten, or just walk away. Yeah, right. The last time Jeff lost it at work, it felt to him like a balloon that suddenly popped. He didn't plan ahead to punch a hole in the wall; it just happened. No way was he going to start deep breathing or counting to ten. Rage is more complicated than that. Trouble is if Jeff wants to keep picking up a paycheck, he has to figure out how to keep the balloon from bursting; he has to keep his anger under control.

People who beat anger demons say there are probably three ways to do it. First, see it coming. Second, redirect that energy into something else. And, third, if nothing else is working, walk away.

Could Jeff see it coming? The problem that causes a blow-up is usually only the last in a series of situations that build up. The day he lost his temper at work, Jeff had a bad cold and overslept. Rushing to get out the door, he forgot his phone and went back for it. His manager got on him about being late and gave him a warning without even asking what happened. There were other problems, too: an irate customer, a co-worker who called in sick, meaning Jeff had to take on extra work.

Someone spilled something and forgot to clean it up and Jeff slipped. He was not hurt, but he was so mad by this time that he couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't the fall that he was mad about; it was the fall, on top of everything else.

Looking back, Jeff could see how the minor problems compounded to push him over the edge. Taking a deep breath does help, if Jeff does it after each minor incident. He could tell a friend, "It's one of those days," or just notice the bad start and let it go; he can let the pressure out a little at a time and stay calm a while longer.

Outlets help, too. Anger is a really physical emotion. If there's a way to walk to work, do a few

situps in the morning or find a basketball game over the weekend, the body actually releases feel-good chemicals that can help keep emotions in balance.

Finally, if the pressure is too great, and the familiar feelings start boiling inside, it might be too late to avoid an explosion. Leaving, then, is a good solution. No one ever got fired for walking away from a fight. Jeff could say, “I’ll be right back,” and then change scenes fast. Eventually, he will have to return and work it out, but changing position physically can help him keep it together emotionally.

Julie Desmond leads career planning and job search workshops in Minneapolis. Have you ever lost it at work? Send your story to julie@insightnews.com.