

## Anger

There can hardly be a more emotive subject and more corrosive effect than that of anger. We all have judgements about the appropriateness of anger and its expression, even those of us who would be considered to have a problem with anger itself. The damage that anger can do, its effect on life and relationships, even, on a larger scale, on the whole world (see 911) is incalculable.

And as to the management of anger, what then? Our practice is a psychotherapy practice, we offer an eclectic mix of psychodynamic, gestalt, and body energy oriented therapies. We are not a cognitive behavioural therapy project, and cognitive behavioural therapy has often been seen as the treatment of choice when trying to deal with anger. This essay, then, describes our theory and our practice in working with anger, not for the behavioural point of view, but from an empathic and deeper understanding of the sources motivations and effects of anger in a psychotherapeutic setting.

Let us, then, look at anger itself. Energetically, anger can be seen as an energy for change. Whatever the stimulus anger prepares us to make something happen, to fight to, to run, to attack, most importantly to act without worrying about the consequences. It is an instinctive and essential survival tool. It floods us with hormones which prepare us for action and reaction in the face of stress, and its roots go back to prehistory, to times of physical danger of stress when these hormones were essential for survival. Unfortunately, in many ways, the energetic system relating to anger is out of date. Our bodies have not evolved in any meaningful way in the last 30,000 years, but our circumstances have. We no longer need to hunt for our survival, and generally we are no longer in fear for our lives, and yet our bodies are still primed with an archaic ability to immerse ourselves in a kill or be killed scenario, to the detriment of those around us, and ultimately to ourselves.

So why is it then that some of us have difficulties with overwhelming and inappropriate anger, and desperate (and despairing) need to control our environment and those around us at times of stress, while others, in the same situation, will handle life completely differently? In our practice we look at the cause of the anger. If, as stated above, anger is an energy for change, then what is it that needs changing? What is the overwhelming fear, the overwhelming dread, the threat to emotional life itself, that must be alleviated at all costs, at any costs? In our experience anger is used as an uplifting emotion in order to avoid the experience of other, far more vulnerable, emotions. Fear of abandonment, rejection, loss of control, of any form of emotional pain, of embarrassment or ridicule, of criticism, any or all of these can give rise to overwhelming rage. But again, why in some people and not in others? It is our absolute experience that the roots of this kind of anger begins in early, and ongoing, infant experience. In some families violence and anger are seen as acceptable ways of communicating, and this can be difficult to and later life.

Even more difficult is a life where very small children are not protected from stress and its chaotic outcome and these early disturbances trigger rage in later life but in a regressed way and without adult control. See our articles on attachment and on the life thread.

Of course, when people come to us trying to manage their anger, they are often in a very difficult state. They feel powerless, because the overwhelming feelings of anger and rage which they may have felt, from time to time, throughout their life, have reached the point where they are damaging their relationships in a terminal way. People come racked with what we might call 'received self-loathing'. They feel judged, wrong, and evil for their inability to handle their overwhelming feelings. But in many cases these feelings of self-loathing, of anger turned inwards, of guilt, give rise to a seething indignation and a hidden rage at a partner or family who got them here in the first place.

Generally speaking, it is our intention to help a client, or potential attendee at in anger management group, to recognise that they do, indeed, have a problem with anger and that that problem is damaging their own life, not only the lives of those around them. Also we aim to bring to light at least some of these processes in their early life that now give rise to feelings of rage and anger in their current life circumstances.

Because it is our fundamental belief that by the time the enraged infant is present in a relationship, (but in an adult body), each situation is already lost. We work very hard with a client to recognise the source of the vulnerable feelings that give rise to the anger and we aim for the client to side with the vulnerable infant who is being triggered in the present into rage and desperate need to control. It is our experience that working in this way, allowing the adult client to care for the feelings of the desperate and hurt infant, offers a deep resolution first in the client and later in the client's relationships.

Over the years we have come across a number of situations where in a relationship, during an argument, a taboo subject is predictably raised, and an escalation, often into violence, ensues. There is then a concentration on the aftermath of the escalation, or of the violence, rather than on the argument and that taboo itself. This cycle can be picked and repeat over years and over many relationships. There is an implicit collusion between the couple involved (or between a client and a psychotherapist) to avoid addressing the real issue in favour of addressing its emotional outcome. Within our anger management practice these hot points are crucial to helping a client examine those much earlier more vulnerable feelings that give rise to the rage that brings him/her to us in the first place.

Generally speaking clients who come to us for anger management need no helping expressing their anger, or they would not be here in the first place. What we work with is the expression of more vulnerable and deeper feelings which

give rise to anger in the first place. The intention is that with expression of fear of sadness, loss, etc the client is able to recognise these fears and these tensions in their everyday life and manage them better without recourse to anger and control of others.

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