

Working With Anger

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Anger is an emotion often associated with violence, conflict, child abuse, marriage and family breakdown, and bullying. Chronic anger toward self and others may lead to self-destructive patterns, addiction, assault, and suicidal behavior. Stress from chronic anger can contribute to changes in the central nervous system, depression, and physical illness. Adapted from [Effective Counseling Skills](#), this paper provides ideas for understanding and working with anger in ways that can be transformative and healing. Practitioners in the helping professions, school administrators, couples and families, and people in the work place can benefit from this brief summary.

Nature or Nurture?

During the psycho-social assessment in counseling, the client seeking help may be asked whether or not he was told that he was an “easy” or “difficult” baby. This question reflects the view that one’s basic passive or aggressive personality is inherited or genetic. Regardless of the truth of this view, the ability of the individual to choose how and when to express anger, remains the foundation principle of working with anger.

Aggressive or passive anger may be learned in childhood, supported by permissiveness or the lack of emotional boundaries and parental discipline, or modeled after aggressive or passive parental behavior. Children who observe aggressive or chronic anger in the home or who have aggressive anger directed toward them, may exhibit bullying behavior toward peers. In adult life, anger may be a perpetuation of the struggle with a parent and may be a reaction to childhood verbal or physical abuse.

Depression and Anxiety

Anger is also observed in people suffering post-traumatic stress (PTSD) and is sometimes a component of grief and anxiety when anger is used to distance from others for fear of closeness and loss, and to defend against fear, sadness, guilt, or low self-worth. Anger and depression have in common an obsession with negative thoughts about self, others, and circumstances. Depression has been described as anger turned inward, and sometimes improvement has been observed in generally passive individuals who are able to externalize their anger.

Counseling Approaches to Anger

Here are some basic principles and methods to use in working with anger:

1. Take responsibility and power: accept that anger is a choice of when, how, and if to express it or not. Make a commitment to avoid using anger to control, intimidate, or punish others.
2. Unresolved anger from past abuse can be therapeutically vented in a safe counseling setting using methods such as role play or an empty chair.

3. The healthy expression of anger in a relationship can be achieved with a single non-judgmental assertive statement: "I feel angry when you (describe the observable behavior of the other), because (describe the observable affect on one's life)." Example: "I feel angry when you don't call to let me know you will be late, because then I can't plan my evening." The passive person who is afraid of raising issues at all, can leave out the feeling word or perhaps substitute a soft emotion (e.g. sadness or fear) for the word angry.
4. Do not vent anger toward others or accuse others, e.g. avoid "You" statements such as "You always....." or "You never....."
5. Understand that there is always a story behind others' behaviour and remain open to understanding the story so that the angry person does not have to rely on anger to make his point.
6. For offering criticism or negative feedback, try asking permission to do so.
7. Always avoid physical violence (hitting, throwing,slamming),blaming, judgmental terms, name-calling, threats, yelling, and sarcastic tone and put-downs.
8. Focus on current issues and avoid bringing up the past as people often disagree on memories of what happened. Agree to disagree on the past and then bring the discussion back to the present issue.
9. In receiving anger, avoid reacting and use a soft voice tone and sincerely reflect the angry statement so that the angry person feels understood.
10. Remember that the person who is angry with you, is also angry with others and perhaps toward himself. View the angry person as hurt, wounded, and powerless by resorting to anger.
11. The ability to hear and respond to angry criticism requires inner strength to set one's own needs and feelings aside.
12. Before asserting your own view, use the sincere reflective statement to convey understanding of the angry person's point of view. Example: "So you feel angry when I don't call to let you know I will be late, because then you can't plan your evening. Is that what you are saying?"
13. Anger may be a familiar habitual default reaction in which reason and power to choose are by-passed. Be determined to change the default reaction.
14. Anger toward others may also reflect uncaring negative self-talk that can be recognized and transformed into positive, supportive, caring, encouraging, reassuring self-talk that one needed to hear from healthy parents. See the paper on [Counseling for Depression and Anxiety](#) on academia.edu.
15. Anger may be an unhealthy way of hanging on to the struggle with uncaring parents reoccurring in the present relationship. Anger hangs on to the old struggle. To help the person let go of the struggle, help him become aware of the soft vulnerable feelings such as fear and sadness that are often beneath the anger.

16. Anger may be an unhealthy way of making contact or of being close to others because healthy caring closeness is too frightening or unfamiliar.
17. Help the angry client move to the feeling under the anger by saying things like, "What feeling is under the anger? Sadness, fear, guilt, some other feeling?"
18. Soft feelings often communicate to others more easily than the hard feeling of anger. Example: "I feel sad and afraid when you....."
19. To reach beneath the anger, say, "If you were to let go of the struggle, what would you have left?" The client answers, "Nothing." Then say, "What feeling comes up inside when you think there is nothing left?" The client answers, "Sadness." This awareness can help the client let go of the struggle.
20. The passive client is often afraid of expressing anger outwardly because of the need to protect themselves or others from a feared outcome. Help the passive client process anger by using other words such as frustrated, annoyed, perturbed, and cheated.
21. Give the passive client the assignment to try the assertive statement (in #3) first directed in role play, then directed toward the counselor, then directed with permission to someone in his life with a report back on what happened. Congratulate the client for his courage and success.
22. Move beyond power and control by problem solving issues and reaching agreements with timelines to implement any agreement. See the paper on [Making Peace in Groups and Relationships](#) on academia.edu
23. Avoid trying to settle difficult or conflict-related issues when driving, going to bed, waking up, eating, rushed, in public, or during activities for relaxation, e.g. taking a walk. Be sure the setting is safe and private.
24. Generally avoid interrupting a person who is venting angry feelings, and when possible use a sincere soft voice tone and reflect the angry person's point of view to help him feel understood.
25. When you or the other person is feeling too angry to talk reasonably, say, "I'm not able to talk right now, but I do want to talk about this as soon as possible."
26. If the other person is withdrawn in angry silence, invite him periodically by saying, "I'm ready to talk now if you want to."
27. While anger may be expressed aggressively, passively, or assertively, the healthiest expression is usually assertive. The ultimate goal to learn how to express or withhold anger intentionally in a way that has the most effective, healing, and healthy outcome. Assess the safety and risk. For example, avoid expressing anger toward a policeman or an abusive spouse or perhaps an employer.