

Anger management

Elsa Bara Traustadottir

Anger is an emotion many people have a problem managing. It is a transdiagnostic problem seen in patients with severe psychiatric disorders such as paranoid schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, in personality disorders such as borderline personality, as well as in patients dealing with depression and anxiety, or people who do not necessarily meet criteria for any psychiatric diagnosis. Anger serves an important purpose to protect the person from any kind of threat. When we perceive a possible threat we react with anger (fight response) or fear (flight response) in order to protect ourselves from danger.

What we perceive as a threat has changed somewhat during human evolution from primarily being physical life-threatening situations to what is nowadays more common – threat of status such as lack of respect, insults, as well as threat to a person's family safety, financial security, personal health, general safety and well-being and whatever we find necessary to protect.

Anger is a valuable emotion and not in itself a mental problem. It can nevertheless become a problem when a person's reaction to anger leads to that person's or other people's sufferings. This can happen in various ways. People may get angry often, stay angry for a long time, or become disproportionately angry. The person's behaviour may also be inappropriate and lead to family and social problems due to impulsive, aggressive or violent behaviour. This impacts on the person's quality of life in several ways, as well as on the quality of life of others.

Anger management refers to therapy aimed at helping the client managing his/hers reaction to anger. The therapy may be individual or group therapy and is commonly based on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) techniques, as described here.

An important element in anger management is conceptualising the problem. This involves identifying anger triggers, thoughts, feelings, physical reactions and behaviours as well as underlying beliefs and attitudes and assumptions towards self, others, anger and anger reactions.

Identifying one's own physical reactions to anger is an important element in therapy. Knowing these signs (heartbeat, physical heat, muscle tension, etc.) serves as an important warning sign that can give the client



Elsa Bara Traustadottir

Cand. psych. Clinical psychologist at the Forensic Psychiatric Unit at Landspítali University Hospital.

a valuable opportunity to choose appropriate reactions. One possible appropriate reaction may be time-out, a strategy where the person takes a temporary break (recommended at least for 60 minutes), calms down, and makes a strategy to solve the conflict.

A few elements are necessary in a time-out: The person needs to tell their counterpart, without any aggression, that they wish to stop and will return to finish the conversation. During a time-out, one makes use of strategies to calm down, physical exercise, meditation or any mental distraction from the incident/trigger. Violent behaviour (screaming, kicking, or punching) should not take place during time-out, even if only aimed at material things, since it strengthens the relationship between anger and violence. (And the next time you get angry, a sand bag is rarely close by!).

When the client is calm, he may reevaluate the situation by correcting distorted thinking in order to solve the conflict. Traditional CBT work is of use here and many clients choose certain questions for this task such as; "Is my thinking helpful?" or "Are there other perspectives?" Other important factors in anger management are problem solving techniques, goal setting and communication skills like assertiveness training and active listening. It depends on the case conceptualization what are the treatment goals and what skills are important to the client in order to manage his/her anger. ■