Exploring Anger

DP 016 - Developmental

By

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EXPLORING ANGER

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Introduction

This group is based on the premise that anger is a connecting, relational emotion. Internally, it can be a response or a trigger for other emotions, and therefore a potentially useful cue for self-exploration and understanding. Externally, anger performs relational functions and can be thought of as a tool for creating between people arousal, intimacy, distance, power, and so on. Anger is neither positive nor negative, so it is inappropriate to assume that either its expression or suppression necessarily builds better relationships or promotes mental health. Anger is an emotion among other emotions.

The "rules" which govern anger are to a great extent culturally determined, but it is within the more specific family context that we acquire our deepest beliefs about its implications for ourselves and our relationships. Within our families, we learn when, how, and whether to be angry, and how to respond to anger in others.

Problems with anger are often a function of interpretations and assumptions evolved from old family patterns which no longer fit. These problems can often be compounded by the notion of anger as a "thing" which must be handled in a limited number of ways, usually involving some form of internal or external venting. Internally, anger may become depression or guilt, while externally, it may take the form of aggression or manipulation. Because beliefs about and behavior around anger are inextricably embedded within relationships, group therapy provides an ideal context for identifying old, problematic patterns and practicing new, functional ones.

The exploration of anger as an emotion connected to other emotions and serving functions in interpersonal relationships should result in a greater ability to use anger creatively and functionally. This structured theme group links retrospective memory work with current interpersonal situations, both within and without the group, in an attempt to help members broaden their repertoires of ways to use anger creatively and constructively.
Session One

GOALS


Content Goals: Elicit beliefs about anger and identify common themes.

Foreshadow these themes of subsequent sessions:

• Feelings of anger are often inconsistent. The same situations do not make everybody angry, nor do individuals always get angry at the same behavior. Anger depends on attributions. It is situation-dependent and dependent on internal feelings. These attributions have their roots both in our culture and in early childhood experiences within the family.

• Anger is a signal of disequilibrium. This can be between people or within a person.

• People often tend to justify their anger and to find reasons that their anger is appropriate. Anger has a social function.

• People don't automatically feel better after expressing anger. Whether or not we feel better after expressing anger often depends on how our anger is received, whether we elicit the response we want.

Introductions, Housekeeping, Key Points

• Welcome to group—Leaders introduce themselves briefly.

• Fees and agency regulations are explained.

• Confidentiality—Emphasize protection, safety, freedom to talk.

• Attendance—Emphasize that the group is structured as a sequence of exercises that facilitates understanding. Participants will get more out of it if they attend every session. Emphasize the importance of individuals to the group as a whole.
First Exercise

Purpose: To relax members, promote group cohesion, and set a precedence for natural and gradually deepening self-disclosure

Beginning with one leader, go around the circle and have each member state three objective personal facts (name, rank, serial number; name, year in school, major). In the same order, go around the circle again, this time with each participant relating an enjoyable recent or past experience. The third time around, instruct participants to say a sentence or two about why they were attracted to this group.

Second Exercise

Purpose: To facilitate self-disclosure of personal beliefs about anger, create group cohesion by emphasizing commonalities and generate material on which to base observations about anger

For each of the following sentences, begin by going around the circle, leader first, and have participants finish the sentence. Ideally, this will turn into a spontaneous and playful exercise with people generating lots of situations. Write down responses on chalkboard. Leaders can facilitate this exercise by completing the sentences with a broad range of situations.

"I always get angry when . . . . . . (my mother calls me Mrs. my husband's name."")
"I sometimes get angry when . . . . . . (when someone pulls in front of me in traffic"")
"When I imagine being angry directly, I fear . . . . . . (rejection, abandonment, humiliation"")
"After I express my anger directly, I feel . . . . . . (great, relieved, vindicated, validated, strong, puny, bad, anxious, depressed"")
Summing up: Use the material generated in the sentence completion exercise to emphasize the following observations about anger.

- Feelings of anger are inconsistent. Anger is often stimulated by the motivations which we attribute to other people’s actions. These attributions depend on the way we are feeling and the way we perceive the other person feels about us. (Cite examples such as the difference between always/sometimes sentences. Or: Your roommate’s failure to live up to an agreement will be much more irritating if you believe this failure is intentional, and so on.) It is often difficult to separate what is happening from your own internal state. Attribution patterns—what we attribute to ourselves and what to others—usually originate in childhood relationships within our families.

- Anger is a sign of disequilibrium either between people or within oneself. Interpersonal disequilibrium may be due to misunderstandings, unresolved tensions, or unmet needs or injustices in the relationship. Intrapersonal disequilibrium may be due to anxiety triggered by feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, uncertainty, or ambivalence. Internal disequilibrium sometimes reflects unresolved issues in our histories, but it can also signal the need for resolving a problem or making a decision in the present. Usually, both sorts of disequilibrium are involved in situations where anger is present. Anger is a sign that something needs attention.

- Anger has a social function, often as a controlling factor. Anger is frequently used to police social behavior, to uphold the norms, and to prevent the breaking of rules. It enforces boundaries. Possibly that is people tend to want to justify their anger. Our society’s rules of behavior are in flux, and there is much concern and confusion over when anger is justified. A good example: people writing to Miss Manners, asking if they ought to be angry about certain social situations. "Should I be angry that my neighbor invites me to dinner, but never uses the good china?"

- People don't automatically feel better after expressing anger. Whether or not we feel better often depends on how our anger was received and whether we elicited the response we wanted. Do we feel validated and important in the offender’s eyes, or do we feel even smaller than before?
THIRD EXERCISE

Purpose: To help members access angry feelings and accompanying beliefs, attributions, and expectations evoked in conflict situations.

Use the following as a guide for leading members in this imagery exercise.

"Get comfortable and let your muscles relax. You'll probably find this exercise easier to do with your eyes closed. I'm going to ask you to visualize some past experiences you've had with anger. I'll guide you through two different scenes. One may be relatively easy to visualize, while the other is more difficult, if not impossible. If that's the case, don't worry, stay relaxed and don't force yourself.

1. "Remember a time when you felt angry, but did nothing to express or act on your anger at the time. Where were you? Try to remember the surroundings. Who was with you? What else did you feel besides anger? What do you think the other person was thinking about or feeling towards you? If this person was not a stranger, did your feelings toward the person change after that time of anger?"

2. "Remember a time when you felt angry and expressed it. Where were you? What were the surroundings like? Who else was there? What were you thinking and feeling before you expressed your anger? What did you say or do? How did the other person respond? How did you feel after you expressed your anger? How did you feel about the other person? How do you think the other person felt about you?"

Ask members to hold on to these memories, which will be used in Session Two. (You might prefer that they write those memories now and leave them with you, so that details are not lost.)
HOMEWORK

Purpose: To increase participants' awareness of the attributions, beliefs, feelings, expectations and actions evoked in them by current conflict situations as a lead into next week's focus on response patterns learned in families of origin.

Ask participants to pay special attention to conflict situations in which they are directly or indirectly involved and to come next week prepared to share what happened. How did they feel? How did they act? What did they expect? How did they know they were angry?
Session Two

GOALS

Process Goals: Continue to build group cohesion and an atmosphere of trust and safety conducive to self-disclosure.

Content Goals: Continue to create awareness of (1) themes which elicit anger and (2) links between past (family) and present experiences in terms of themes which elicit anger and mechanisms employed to manage anger.

FIRST EXERCISE.

Purpose: To relax members and promote group cohesion

Beginning with a leader, go around the circle and have each member relate an experience that he/she enjoyed this week.

SECOND EXERCISE.

Purpose: To heighten members' awareness of their patterns of managing and expressing anger

Go around the circle two times. First, ask members to describe briefly their first memory from the Session One memory exercise "when you were aware of feeling anger but did nothing to express it". Second, ask them to describe the Session One memory of when they felt angry and expressed it.
THIRD EXERCISE.

**Purpose:** To process homework assignment

Have members describe an incident that made them angry during the past week and respond to the following:

1) Describe the situation.
2) Were you aware of feeling anything other than anger?
3) How did you feel physically?
4) What did you do?
5) What did the other person do?
6) How did you feel after the incident?

**Processing:** Briefly focus on the theme apparent in the evocative situation for each individual. Succinctly identify mechanisms central to members' anger management strategies. This will lay the groundwork for the next session's exercise designed to raise awareness of similarities between past and present themes and strategies relating to anger.

**HOMEWORK**

Instruct members to continue observing themselves in conflict situations, in line with homework from Session One. Ask them to use the six points from exercise three above to structure their observations.
Session Three

GOALS

**Process Goals:** Continue to build group cohesion and atmosphere of trust and safety.

**Content Goals:** Create awareness of link between childhood (family) and current "anger" experiences both in terms of themes which elicit anger and mechanisms employed to manage it.

EXERCISE

**Purpose:** To identify links between past (family) and present anger themes and anger management strategies, and, secondarily, to create a basis for understanding the effects of the management strategies on the individuals involved.

**Guided Imagery**

Instruct participants to relax and try to remember a childhood incident when they or someone else in their family was angry. Slowly guide them through the scene, evoking characteristics of the circumstances: what the setting was like, who was there, how others were perceived, how typical or atypical the incident was, how they felt inside, what happened, and how they and others felt and acted afterwards.

Repeat this exercise again, only this time instruct participants to recall a family incident of anger during their adolescence.
**Family Sculpture**

Now, instruct members to pick one of the two memories to use in the family sculpture exercise. Explain time guidelines: this exercise will begin today and continue next week, allowing 15 to 20 minutes for creating and processing each "family sculpture." Instructions should go something like this: "Based on the memory you have chosen, use as few or many of your fellow group members as you need to represent the scene. Ask whoever you want to play whatever role you like. Place them in relation to each other in the positions and with the facial expressions which best portray the feelings, actions, and reactions that occurred in your family when someone was angry. If you want, you can change this sculpture to represent what led up to, what happened during, and what happened after the event you choose to depict."

After a sculpture has been done, ask the sculptor to describe the thoughts and feelings evoked by the scene. What constraints did they feel? Focus on the anger themes, especially as they relate to issues raised by the first exercise. Link strategies for managing anger in family with strategies described in previous sessions. For example, participants who as children were powerless in the face of their parents' fighting may feel powerless and exhibit helpless behavior in current conflict situations. Alternatively, such individuals may manage the feelings of powerlessness through domineering or aggressive behavior. Participants who as children were ignored or humiliated when they attempted to defend their perceptions, may as adults automatically withdraw in the face of conflict. This could take the form of either withdrawn silence or high volume tirades. In general anger strategies may be seen as ways of defending against the experience of vulnerability with another person.

Ask each actor to state very briefly (two sentences) feelings evoked in his/her role within the family sculpture. In processing, focus on whatever constraints participants express.

**Closing** (Allow about 10 minutes.) It is important to express appreciation to people for sharing personal experiences with the group. Emphasize the possibility that strong emotions may have been evoked. Acknowledge the difficulty of looking back to childhood/adolescent experiences.
Encourage people to focus on the links between issues which get their goats now and in the past; and strategies for anger management. Emphasize that some strategies appear very different on the surface, yet they can have the same effect. For example, withdrawal or making the other person totally submissive to you both leave no room for two people to get what they need.

**HOMEWORK**

Tell people to continue watching what happens in conflict situations during the week and discovering links with the memories which they have begun to explore during this session.
Session Four

GOALS

Process Goals: Continue to build group cohesion and an atmosphere of trust and safety.

Content Goals: Create awareness of the link between childhood (family) and current "anger" experiences both in terms of themes which elicit anger and mechanisms employed to manage it.

EXERCISE.

Purpose: To identify links between past (family) and present anger themes and anger management strategies; secondarily, to create a basis for understanding the stalemated position of participants involved in dysfunctional patterns of anger management; and to deepen group cohesion and understanding among members.

Briefly review the instructions for the family sculpture exercise introduced in the previous session. "Pose group members in a tableau which represents your memory of anger as it was expressed in your family. You can change the sculpture to represent what led up to, what happened during, and what happened after the event you choose to depict."

After the scene is in place, ask the sculptor to describe the thoughts and feelings evoked. Ask the actors to say how they felt. Focus on anger themes.
and strategies. Emphasize the no-win nature of the interaction and the powerlessness of all participants, whether dominant or submissive. Problematic anger management strategies often invoke the feared response and lead to situations characterized by guilt or heightened interpersonal tensions. Participants may feel even more helpless in these aftermath situations than in the initial confrontation. Ask the sculptor about links between feelings and actions in the childhood scene with those that occur in current anger situations. Talk about underlying assumptions as expressed in family systems; for example, If people have conflicting needs and feelings, someone has to lose.

Link members' emotional experiences by tying themes and strategies expressed in the current sculpture with those depicted earlier.

Possible themes
1) When I express my anger, no one hears me.
2) If I do not express my anger violently, no one will respect me.
3) When I am angry, I am helpless.
4) If I express my anger, I will hurt everyone around me and everyone will hate me.
5) If I express my anger, I will be a bad person.

Corresponding strategies
1) When I'm angry, I don’t say anything.
2) When I'm angry, I lash out or throw something.
3) When I'm angry, I get sad and depressed.
4) When I'm angry, I push people away.
5) When I'm angry, I feel guilty and apologize.

Closing Express appreciation to members who sculpted their families. Comment on the power of these memories to evoke strong emotion. Suggest that just as memories evoke strong feelings in the present, old patterns can have a powerful influence on the here and now. Ask everyone to think about the links between past and present and assumptions regarding the resolution of conflict.
HOMEWORK

**Purpose:** To increase the ability to differentiate among the emotions associated with or accompanied by anger and to ease the transition from the focus on interactions to next week's focus on internal dynamics and individual perceptions

Ask members to reflect during the week on the various family sculptures presented by the participants, and to note which characters, or qualities of certain characters, seem similar to ones in their own lives.
Session Five

GOALS

**Process Goals:** Build on the trust which has been developed and prepare the way for deepening interactions between group members.

**Content Goals:** Create awareness of family "templates" members use to interpret and respond to conflicts, and tie the consequent expectations and assumptions to members' perceptions of their own and others' goals and motivations.

(This session is designed to consolidate participants' understanding of the continuity between habitual conflict responses from childhood and current responses, and to prime them for the last four sessions which will gradually become more process oriented.)

**FIRST EXERCISE**

**Purpose:** To bring people back psychologically to the group's work

Ask members to draw on the self-observation homework of earlier sessions and their reflections on the family sculptures presented in the group, to talk briefly about patterns of emotions and thoughts that they have found precede or accompany their own anger. Encourage them to apply these insights to their experience and behavior.
SECOND EXERCISE

**Purpose:** To consolidate the idea that family patterns with their underlying assumptions become the "glasses" through which we see ourselves and the world.

Distribute photocopies of the form included after this section and paraphrase the instructions at the top: "Recall the emotions that precede, accompany or follow your anger and list them. Next to each, write down the character(s) from the family sculptures who best portray that emotion or piece of yourself."

In processing this exercise with the entire group, emphasize that assumptions based on family experience frequently affect our interpretations of and reactions to present conflict situations. When intense feelings are stimulated, the tendency to force observations and perceptions into the framework learned in childhood is especially compelling. Under these conditions, it is particularly difficult to see people or situations in any way that is inconsistent with the win/lose premise of childhood; and we often overlook dimensions of the situation and people with whom we are in conflict that challenge the validity and usefulness of that framework.

HOMEWORK

**Purpose:** To help participants expand their range of interpretations of conflict episodes.

During the week, observe a conflict between two people that you know only slightly or not at all. Next week come prepared to tell the group what your assumptions were about the cause of the conflict and what characteristics you ascribed to the two people involved.
Session Five
Exercise II

Recall the emotions that precede, accompany or follow your anger and list them. Next to each, write down the character(s) from the family sculptures who best portray that emotion or piece of yourself.

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Session Six

**GOALS**

**Process Goals:** Consolidate group cohesion and help participants perceive each other multi-dimensionally.

**Content Goals:** Help participants consolidate the insights gained thus far. Build skills in perception and begin bridging the gap between insight and application by involving members in activities which require creative participation and the ability to step out of rigid perceptual frameworks.

**FIRST EXERCISE**

Ask members to share any thoughts, or feelings they had following last session.

**SECOND EXERCISE**

Ask for examples of conflicts that people observed. What assumptions did people have about the participants' motivations, thoughts and feelings? Leaders may use material generated in this discussion to emphasize the following points:

1) Often painful feelings of being unseen, misunderstood, or devalued precede anger.
2) We often choose anger in response to situations which evoke intense negative feelings because it seems preferable to experiencing the pain of hurt and helplessness.
3) The assumptions underlying family patterns learned in childhood frequently become the filter through which we interpret intense interpersonal situations.

4) This filter or overlay sometimes constrains our interpretations and limits our responses. Consequently, others' responses to us are limited.

In the discussion, tie the themes and assumptions implicit in the examples given by participants in the preceding sessions and homework assignments to themes and assumptions apparent in family sculptures.

RE-FRAMING EXERCISE

Choose one of the observed homework situations and ask for volunteers to roleplay the conflict. Divide the group into two teams and explain that each team will support and coach one of the actors. Each team is to think of as many plausible reasons as possible for their actor's behavior. (The actor should participate in this process.) The team's job is to frame the "protegee's" behavior in the most understandable, justifiable and convincing manner that they can.

Have the actors switch teams, and instruct each team to explain to its new actor the other actor's point of view. Now, ask them to re-play the scene, given this new information. The rest of the group (both teams working together) is instructed to coach the roleplayers so that the conflict can be resolved in the best way possible.

Discuss original assumptions. Link them to themes of being misunderstood, unheard, unseen, uncared for, or disrespected. Point out how constrained and rigid responses must be within the framework of the original assumptions. Emphasize the relationship between a multi-dimensional perspective and the ability to respond in a flexible, creative manner to conflict.

HOMEWORK

Ask members to think about and write down at least three things which have annoyed them about the group so far.
Session Seven

GOALS

**Process Goals:** Increase understanding of members' personal reactions to each other within "anger" framework developed thus far.

**Content Goals:** Help participants further consolidate insights and build perceptive skills as a means of moving from insight to application.

EXERCISE

Use the material generated by last week's homework assignment to process tensions and conflicts within the group. Leaders should work to clarify members' old, unhelpful patterns (splitting, using anger to gain power or cover hurt and so on) and guide them in practicing skills developed in the group as they deal with this "live" material.

Leaders should remind members near the end of the discussion that next week is the last session, and tell them that this session will be spent in summarizing the group experience and saying good-bye.
Session Eight

GOALS

**Process Goals:** Maintain group cohesiveness in the context of separation. Help group members to internalize the gains of recent weeks.

**Content Goals:** Create awareness of members' feelings about termination. Promote understanding of interactional patterns using common group experiences, especially from Session Seven. Consolidate a clear sense of the ways in which members can continue the work begun in this group.

**Note:** Session Seven's discussion, combined with the fact of termination, may arouse considerable anxiety in some members. It is important that members go away having experienced tolerated anger in important relationships. Leaders should work to assure that disappointment or frustration with an imperfect group experience (including, quite probably, imperfect leadership) doesn't lead to total devaluation or splitting off of the constructive aspects of the experience. Leaders should confidently model their belief that anger need not damage relationships or individuals beyond repair.

EXERCISE

Leaders announce to the group that they will run through a series of questions in order to integrate the previous session's experience, so that it can be understood and used as a basis for implementing the knowledge gained in the last 8 weeks. Leaders will write people's answers on a sheet of newsprint so that everyone can see them.
1. Many people expressed anger in group last week. Using words for feelings only (not thoughts), what were the feelings (states of mind) that preceded your anger? [Leaders should summarize and comment on similarities between members' experience of anger.]

2. What feelings did you experience following last session? [Same instructions re: summarizing and commenting on similarities.]

3. What did you do in last session that was familiar?

4. What did you do that was different?

5. What do you hope to change in your important relationships outside this group?

6. How are you going to do it? [Here leaders may give feedback to members and make recommendations regarding additional therapy if appropriate.]

SAYING GOOD-BYE.

Leaders should give a brief lead-in to this part of the session, saying whatever parts of the following apply:

"Knowing that this is our last time together as a group, what do we want to say to each other before leaving? These sessions together have sometimes been painful and uncomfortable, but nevertheless significant. In some cases, you've taken risks with people in this room that you've never taken with anyone else before. Everyone shared pieces of themselves that they were afraid or ashamed of, and that is a significant risk to most of us. Now that we are about to disband as a group, what pieces of this experience and each other do we want to hold onto?

"Think of things others in the group have said or critical interactions that touched you, helped you, struck you as true, important, or relevant to your experience—things that you will remember and use. Imagine yourself in the middle of one of those arguments with a friend, roommate, or boss. Is there something that was said or happened here you could use to bolster your courage and resolve when you need it the most? Tell the person who said it."

With this beginning, leaders guide the group through termination.