



## Anger Management: Often Mismanaged

[Anger management](#) is a common term used in working with clients with anger issues. Even Hollywood has capitalised on the term as a title for a movie, which, unsurprisingly, was directed at a largely male audience.

At Brighton and Hove Psychotherapy we offer work on '[anger management](#).' However, the actual content of this may well be quite different to other clinicians, so read on:

### What is anger?

Anger is one of the most important emotions we can feel. It gets a bad reputation, as nobody wants to be labelled as 'angry.' It is much more appealing to be viewed as a 'happy' or 'content' person. However, it is impossible to feel happy or content without also feeling anger at times.

Before we get into what anger is, it may be useful to revisit the basics of how feelings like anger come about. In an earlier blog entitled '[The Pyramid of Change in Psychotherapy](#)', I described just this. In brief, we are all 'embodied' beings, meaning we are one with our bodies. Our bodies constantly feed us data through sensations, changes in our physiology, changes in sensation, right down to the tiniest change in cellular structure. Our physiology translates to our emotions, which is literally our physiology 'in-motion'. Groups or clusters of emotions are feelings which in turn lead to the generation of our thoughts, embodied in our behaviour, which gives us the external results we experience.

So, anger is a physiological response to a real or perceived external stimulus. Most of us experience anger as tension or tightness in our core. Anger in its most profound and pure form is our body saying 'no' and is a response to a boundary violation (real or perceived). The greater the boundary violation, the greater the anger.

Therefore, anger is vital to us in knowing what is right or wrong for us moment by moment. It enables us to define, communicate, protect and if necessary, fight for our boundaries.

**I don't want to be an angry person!**



Nobody is any one kind of person. People who are labelled as 'angry' are generally hyper-vigilant and feel unsafe in the world. They are either enraged, or waiting to be.

'Angry people' have generally learnt that they are not allowed to relate in a healthy way and to communicate their boundaries knowing that their wishes will be respected.

The healthy expression of anger became dangerous to 'angry people' when they were growing up, and they either had to swallow their anger (hold it in their body) or use rage to have some sense of safety.

Where we have had to protect our caregivers from anger – where it has been unsafe to say 'no' – we often end up holding a lot of anger ourselves.

### **Anger vs rage**

Anger, like all other emotions, is a feeling that tells us something is not OK for us. It may be a request by somebody, it may be someone trying to break into our house or it may be something as subtle as somebody standing too close to us. Thus, anger can be broken down into subtle nuances of frustration, irritation, annoyance through to feeling livid.

Anger always holds the other person in mind. It is a feeling where we are able to state 'no' empathically. We do not need to be abusive or defensive in stating no, and we don't need to be responsible for the other.

On the other hand, although it is unpleasant to be on the receiving end of rage, rage comes from a place of powerlessness. It is anger that could not be expressed healthily. There may be times when rage is appropriate, but in a relatively safe world, these times are rare.

### **Anger is a guy thing**

Hopefully, it is now clear that anger is vital to all of us for good emotional, psychological and physical health.

Both genders can carry unhealthy anger. However, the way anger manifests in each gender may be different and lead to the misnomer that men struggle with anger management. While I have come across plenty of 'angry women' and 'depressed men', it is not uncommon



for men to express rage externally and for women to internalise it and take it out on themselves. They are both experiencing anger and 'mismanaging it'.

### **Anger: The Therapy Room Taboo**

Too many counsellors and psychotherapists are scared of anger, particularly that of men. This is in part because men can at times express their anger inappropriately and may also be because many therapists are women who may not wish to be on the receiving end of a man's anger. Many male therapists don't, either, for that matter.

Too often anger gets 'misdiagnosed' as either covering up sadness, or simply presents as dissociation (cut-offness) or [depression](#). Working with sadness and depression is important, but through working with the anger, the client can start to feel empowered in a healthy way.

Good counsellors and psychotherapists are able to attune to clients and work in the therapeutic alliance through establishing a safe relationship and calming the client's fear system. This is great, but it is only half the work.

Anger stemming from [childhood developmental trauma](#) (complex trauma) or [PTSD](#) must be felt and worked through. Clients need to first learn what physical sensations are the embodiment of their anger, then learn to feel them in their body and stay present with them.

### **Pendulating through anger**

All our emotions either increase or decrease our arousal levels. Anger increases our arousal, calm decreases our arousal level. Alongside this, every emotion is either moving us towards producing growth hormone and having healthy immunity or towards pumping stress hormones such as cortisol into our system (low immunity).

We also experience a journey with each emotion. We feel an activation; so with anger, a slight tension, an increase in heart-rate; some shallower breathing and a narrowing of our field of vision. The challenge is for the therapist to teach the client to remain connected and curious about how they 'do' anger in their body and to stay present with the feeling until it subsides (and it will). This is called pendulation. More on this in another blog.

So, rather than anger management being about disconnecting from feelings of anger through dissociation or forcing a change in emotion through the body, anger management is



learning to work in recognising anger as it manifests; to work through unexpressed anger relating to past trauma and to develop a healthy relationship with anger going forward.

Mark Vahrmeyer