Perceptions of Anger

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Course Goals

We expect to help participants:

- Define anger and differentiate between anger and annoyance
- Develop a personal philosophy of anger
- Consider how thought processes are connected to angry feelings and behaviors
- Assess, challenge and modify trigger thoughts, beliefs and distortions
- Dispel myths and other untruths about anger
- Utilize brain research and development information to better understand anger
Defining Anger

- “Anger is an emotional and a subjective experience. It is separate and distinct from the physical reactions that might result from it.” (Bernard Golden)

- “…a negative phenomenological (or internal) feeling state associated with specific, cognitive and perceptual distortions and deficiencies (e.g., misappraisals, errors and attributions of blame, injustice, preventability and/or intentionality), subjective labeling, physiological changes, and action tendencies to engage in socially constructed and reinforced organized behavioral scripts.” (Howard Kassinove and Denis G. Sukhodolsky)
Defining Anger

“…anger refers to a label given to a constellation of specific, uncomfortable subjective experiences and associated cognitions (e.g., thoughts, beliefs, images, etc.) that have various associated verbal, facial, bodily and autonomic reactions. It is a transient state, in that it eventually passes and it is a social role, in that our culture or subculture allows for the display of certain kinds of behaviors associated with the internal experience, but punishes others…” (Howard Kassinove and Denis G. Sukhodolsky)
Defining Anger

- “…anger may not have a particular goal.” (Howard Kassinove and Denis G. Sukhodolsky)
- “…anger is an accusatory response to some perceived misdeed.” (Howard Kassinove and Denis G. Sukhodolsky)
- “A powerful response triggered by another emotion, that results in an attack of varying intensity that is not always appropriate.” (Dr. Tim Murphy)
Anger vs. Annoyance

- Annoyance is a common and frequent feeling when things do not go perfectly right and usually dissipates within moments.
- Annoyance occurs when something not terribly important does not go as expected; there is a minor accident or mistake; there is some degree of discomfort involved.
- People can feel annoyed rather frequently because the world and its occupants are not perfect, annoyance for the most part is a rather innocuous, relatively harmless fact of life.
Philosophy of Parenting

As an example, Barbara Coloroso in *Kids Are Worth It* suggests the following three principles as a basis for a philosophy of parenting:

~ Kids are worth it
~ Children should be treated only in ways I would like to be treated
~ The basic criteria for parenting decisions: if it works and maintains a child’s dignity, do it
Philosophy of Anger

- A philosophy is a summation of one’s key beliefs and values with regard to a subject.

- It determines and guides how one behaves.

- It defines one’s position on a broad subject that is reflected in each specific aspect of that subject.
Philosophy of Anger

- Can be helpful as a guide, providing a means for assessing decisions and directions they are taking.
- When interacting with adults and children, can be clearer about what to do and why.
- More easily assess new approaches or information by checking to see that is does not conflict with their established philosophy.
Three Primary Areas to Attend to

- Managing our own anger
- Responding effectively when someone angrily confronts you
- Helping others understand and manage their anger needs and issues
Considerations

- What is both critical and true about anger?
- As a result of these truths, how will I consistently respond *when feeling angry*?
- As a result of these truths, how will I consistently respond *when someone angrily confronts me*?
- As a result of these truths, how will I consistently respond *when guiding and teaching others about understanding and managing their situations when anger is an issue or concern*?
Philosophy of Anger

- Participants are encouraged to gather and integrate the principles that best capture their personal beliefs.
- Participants are encouraged to formulate a personal, “Philosophy of Anger”.
- Once formulated, participants are encouraged to become highly intentional and clear about applying their philosophy to all decisions associated with anger.
Anger: Emotional and Physiological Phenomenon

- Understand and then manage their own anger in healthy, effective ways
- Respond intentionally, systemically and effectively with others when angrily confront them
- Facilitate and/or teach other about anger so that they can better manage their own and respond in healthy, effective ways to the anger children express
Myths and Other Untruths

- **Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion** (Tavris) lists incorrect societal assumptions that have emerged over the years and may be infused into our belief systems. She discovered these are not true, yet are believed by many.

- “Emotional energy is a fixed quantity that can be dammed up or, conversely, can ‘flood’ the system.”

- “Anger and aggression are inextricably, biologically linked; anger is the feeling and aggression its overt expression, but both are aspects of the aggressive instinct.”
Myths and Other Untruths

- “Anger is an instinctive response to a threat and to the frustration of your goals or desires.”
- “If the outward expression of anger is blocked, anger ‘turns inward,’ where you feel it as depression, guilt, shame, anxiety or lethargy.”
- “The American culture, leaning heavily on the messages sent by the psychotherapy industry, has promoted the image that ‘inside every tranquil soul a furious one is screaming to get out.’”
Discredited Theories

- The Anger-Ulcer Link
- The Anger-Depression Link
- The Suppressed Anger causing Medical Problems Link
- Aggression is the instinctive catharsis for anger
- Talking out anger gets rid of it, or at least makes the person feel less angry
- Tantrums and other childhood rages are healthy expressions of anger that forestall neurosis
American Culture

Many seem to believe that anger:

~ Restores the sense of dignity and fair play
~ Feeds ambition and competitiveness
~ Asserts the individual in an anonymous world
Other Cultures

- Some cultures have no specific word for anger because anger is simply unacceptable.
- Anger in these cultures is a concept defined as part of a collection of feelings like sadness, frustration and disappointment.
- Anger is considered to be a direct threat to survival in cultures where maintaining high levels of cooperation and civility are critical.
- Fair play, competitiveness and individualism are not necessarily valued in other cultures.
Other Cultures

- Most researchers conclude that anger and how it is expressed is much more of a social than emotional event.
- People in other cultures truly do control their anger and other emotions in favor of maintaining relationships.
- These other cultures have been found to produce emotionally healthy, happy people, not people who are burdened and emotionally damaged as a result of withholding or blocking the free expression of their anger.
Expressing Anger

- Anger itself is not an emotion to fear or avoid.
- However, helping people find what experts once called “healthy ways of expressing anger” is also not a goal.
- For person expressing anger there is often momentary relief that was misinterpreted as some sort of healing. Over time researchers realized that no real healing was occurring and that feelings of anger actually increased and heightened the potential to do emotional or physical harm.
Expressing Anger

“Expressing anger, in whatever way, harmful or harmless, does not solve the real problem of anger. It is more likely to keep your anger present than it is to dispel it. Consider, does laughing reduce your good disposition, or does it keep it around? ... [There are] feelings that go with certain behaviors, just as anger is a feeling that goes with certain behaviors. Why is it then that expressing anger is expected to reduce it? Anger is a set of behaviors that occur when certain problems are experienced. Using these behaviors makes it more likely that they will continue to be used, not less likely.” (Carl Semmelroth)
Expressing Anger

- Emphasis is on making some fundamental changes in our understanding of the nature of anger and realizing that what was encouraged for decades was incorrect or overly-emphasized, inadequate or incomplete.
- There is a place for healthy catharsis.
- Anger can be a natural response to feeling threatened, preparing the mind and body for fight or flight.
- Anger, when generated as a result of injustices, can be highly motivating and energizing, propelling a person to action.
Expressing Anger

- Anger can be like a very potent hot spice. Used carefully in just the right way with a sufficient level of responsibility and care, can be healthy and appropriate.
Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy

- Ellis postulated that people experience one or more anger-engendering beliefs and suggested that people rationally generate alternate beliefs to counter and lessen the intensity of feelings.

  ~ Catastrophizing, awfulizing, horriblizing
  ~ No frustration tolerance
  ~ “Should’s” and “ought’s”
  ~ Global self or other rating
Catastrophizing…

- Characterized by thoughts such as: “It’s horrible that my child failed this test!”

- Rational alternative way of thinking: “It’s a shame that he failed the test, but it is not the end of the world.”
No Frustration Tolerance

- Characterized by thoughts such as: “I can’t stand it that he has failed his test!”

- Rational alternative way of thinking: “I don’t like it that he failed the test.”
“Should’s” and “Ought’s”

- Characterized by thoughts such as: “He should have been able to pass this test! He should have known he didn’t study hard enough.”

- Rational alternative way of thinking: “It would have been better if he had studied more,” OR “Maybe he could have done better and maybe I don’t know what problems he faced.”
Global Self or Other Rating

- Characterized by thoughts such as: “He’s always totally irresponsible!”

- Rational alternative way of thinking: “He made a mistake in judging how much studying he needed to do, just like most kids do from time to time.”
Unhealthy Anger-Triggering Thoughts

- Educators can look for how they are framing realities to help them recognize when anger-triggering thoughts might be the cause of someone’s anger.

  ~ perception of being deliberately harmed and victimized by someone
  ~ perception the person deliberately intended to do harm
  ~ belief the person was wrong and bad to attempt to purposely do harm and they should have behaved better
12 Categories of Distortions

- Irritation fixation
- Assuming (via “mind reading”)
- Catastrophizing
- All or nothing thinking
- Should’s, ought’s and must’s
- Feelings passed on as facts

- Over-generalizing
- Abusive labeling
- Personalizing
- Blaming
- Unfavorable comparisons
- Regrets

*The Anger Management Sourcebook*
Categories of Distortions

- Blaming
- Catastrophizing/magnifying
- Misattributions
- Overgeneralizations
- Demanding/commanding

The Anger Control Workbook
Brain Research

- Primary sources
  * Emotional Intelligence* (Daniel Goleman) and
  * Talking with Kids: Guided Discussions for Developing Emotional Intelligence* (David Cowan and Susan Palomares)
Cortex, Limbic and Amygdala

- The cortex is the thinking part of the brain and where logic and judgment reside.
- Emotional part of brain is limbic system.
Cortex, Limbic and Amygdala

When emotionally experiencing and expressing anger a person is not in the thinking part of the brain (cortex). They are using the emotional (limbic) area of the brain.
Cortex, Limbic and Amygdala

- Small structure in the limbic system is the amygdala which authors call “the sentry” of the brain. It is the storehouse for emotional memories.
Cortex, Limbic and Amygdala

- All incoming data from the world passes through the amygdala where decisions are made as to whether it goes to the limbic or cortex areas based on the storehouse of memories.
If there is enough of an emotional charge created by incoming data, the amygdala can override the cortex. The person will now react with the emotional part of the brain (limbic).
The amygdala “charges into action without regard for the consequences” because it is not able to consider the potential impact.
Cortex, Limbic and Amygdala

- Goleman (Emotional Intelligence) calls this an “amygdala hijacking.”
Hormones of Anger

- Amygdala has the power to flood the brain with hormones called catecholamines that cause physical and emotional alarm.
- First surge of hormones creates a rush of energy to prepare for fight or flight reaction. Impact of this hormone can last several minutes.
- Thinking part of the brain may not be engaged when the person becomes violent in words or actions because of these hormones. These reactions come from the limbic area of the brain.
Hormones of Anger

- A second hormonal response is an adrenocortical arousal which can last for hours and even days.
- Having this hormone that lasts so long in the body can explain why someone has an initial, powerful anger reaction to one thing, seems to calm down but when another small incident occurs while the hormone is still in the bloodstream, the person can have another huge flare-up that is disproportionate to the situation.
- It can take an average of 20 minutes for a person who has experienced an angry state of arousal to calm and move from the limbic to cortex areas of the brain.
Got Anger? “ACE” It!

- It can be helpful to have a quick grid to conceptualize and guide your response to an angry situation.

- Goals and intentions of “ACE” are to preserve and protect physical, emotional and relational health and to facilitate a process that moves people from emotional to logical (limbic to cortex) in their responses.
Got Anger? “ACE” It!

- “A” = “Assess” the situation
- “C” = “Choose” which option might be most helpful
- “E” = Execute the decision well
- More about specifics of “ACE” in next course
“Think About”

- We encourage participants to formulate a Philosophy of Anger.
- We encourage participants to consider the myths around anger, their impact and what changes you might want to make to your own belief system.
- We encourage participants to consider their own “trigger thoughts.”
- We encourage participants to be observers with regard to the brain information presented and how they respond to anger situations.
Recommended Reading

- Anger Disorders: Definition, Diagnosis and Treatment. Howard Kassinove, 1995.
Recommended Reading