

Anger Management Techniques for Clients Who Have Experienced Trauma

WREP Brief #3 – Provided by Jessica Jacoby, LCSW

Anger is a naturally occurring emotion and is not necessarily a sign of anything problematic unless it begins to have consequences or impairment for the person experiencing it. At times, anger can even be positive as it functions as a signal that something is not right and needs to be changed. It is an emotion that is subjectively experienced as “negative” and is usually in response to a threat. Anger has elements similar to the emotion of fear but is associated with a motivation to approach the threat rather than avoid it.

For clients who have witnessed, heard about, or been involved in a traumatic event, negative emotional states are common. Their responses might include angry outbursts or physical aggression toward people or objects.

The level of anger can indicate the severity of the post-traumatic symptoms. Clients who have experienced early, extensive and repeated trauma such as childhood abuse, chronic combat exposure or domestic violence, tend to have the most difficulty with anger.

Why is anger related to trauma?

There are two theories about the role that anger plays in a trauma response:

Fear Avoidance

This theory suggests that anger serves a specific purpose of avoiding other emotional experiences when triggered by trauma-related reminders. Moving into anger is used as a way of coping and as an alternative to more vulnerable emotions like fear, sadness or pity.

Survival Mode

This theory states that those who have experienced trauma more readily perceive situations, including social conflict, as threatening even when they are not. Clients will interpret the

behaviors of others as intended to harm them more often than those without a history of trauma.

According to both of these explanations, anger serves a purpose for those who have posttraumatic difficulties: it mitigates the painful emotions triggered and bolsters the need to gain control/survive. To the outside world, the anger reactions may be confusing and easily judged but it is important to look at what is behind these behaviors to understand the role they play for the client.

Parts of Anger

It may be helpful to break down the elements in the experience of anger in order to assist clients in identifying them for themselves.

Images: the mental pictures that flash in the “mind’s eye” about previous experiences including any traumatic events

Self-talk: the steady stream of dialogue that occurs in our head which often includes blame, morally-based judgments or thoughts about revenge. These are usually not expressed aloud especially at work.

Bodily sensations: knotted stomach, sweating, headache and muscle tension are common feelings in anger. Physiological arousal is a major part of a posttraumatic reaction which includes the client experiencing heart pounding, trouble breathing and sweating. When triggered, the sympathetic nervous system gets activated increasing heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and decreasing the activity of the gastrointestinal system.

Patterns of expression: the feelings of anger can boil inside or be expressed outwardly. Aggression is the behavior that others can observe while anger is the feeling experienced internally. Aggressive behaviors can include yelling, slamming doors, breaking things, shoving people, etc.

Anger in the Workplace

The workplace can be a stressful and difficult environment to navigate for anyone. For those with a history of trauma, it can provide even more obstacles that are hard to overcome.

Expressing anger in the workplace can come at a cost for both the individual and the organization or company. Problems for clients who struggle to manage their anger include lack of advancement, colleagues being less likely to work with them, vendors or customers avoiding them or even being fired. Also, their reputation can be affected, and they may be known to lose their temper, abuse others or make errors in judgment. For the organization, anger in the workplace increases relationship conflict, absenteeism and turnover. It can decrease work time, collaboration, productivity and commitment. As a workforce

development professional, you are essential in helping clients recognize and address their anger to avoid these negative outcomes.

Coping with Anger

The remainder of **this article will focus on strategies that workforce professionals can use to help clients identify and manage their anger while on the job.** Before proceeding, however, it is important to mention that many clients will continue to be triggered and respond in anger if the underlying trauma has not been addressed and/or treated. There are several types of therapy that have been proven effective in treating posttraumatic symptoms. Therefore, it is essential to foster a supportive environment which encourages help-seeking behavior. Doing so will facilitate approaching the client and guiding them to the treatment that will fully address the client's trauma reactions. Ideally, workplaces that provide this type of environment will benefit as their employees will be more likely to obtain help.

Identify Triggers

A first step to coping with anger is to identify triggers that can prompt feelings of anger or an anger episode. After pinpointing these triggers with your client, you can **decide whether a plan to avoid or escape may be appropriate.** It is a conversation centered around what triggers/problems are worth confronting and which can be avoided without any major costs to the client. Helping them to choose their battles is essential to workplace success! Let's look at two approaches for those triggers which are not worth confronting, at least temporarily:

Planned avoidance: planning ahead of time to stay away from a person or situation that prompts anger

Planned escape: removing yourself from a situation after you notice there is a problem and you are starting to become angry.

If it is no risk to their job duties, it may be helpful for them to stay away from specific triggers in the workplace. Additionally, it may be helpful to identify the bodily sensations and thoughts that can signal to the client that they are starting to become angry; these are considered "red flags" informing them to take a break from the situation. This means that the client takes a "time out" and physically removes themselves from the triggering situation. Sometimes we need distance from a situation to be better equipped to handle it or until a more permanent solution can be found.

Here are two worksheets that may be helpful in coaching clients on this skill:

[\[Creating a List of Anger Situations pdf\]](#)

[\[Avoiding and Escaping from Anger Triggers pdf\]](#)

Calming Internal Urges

As mentioned earlier, when a client who has experienced trauma is triggered, the body becomes aroused and engages in the fight, flight or freeze reaction. One way to calm our bodies is to engage in relaxation exercises. Once the body becomes regulated, clients will be better equipped to approach situations at work.

1 [Progressive Muscle Relaxation audio](#)

2 [Progressive Muscle Relaxation script](#)

3 [Passive Muscle Relaxation audio](#)

Another skill in managing internal urges is called “grounding” or getting present. Experiencing all of the thoughts, feelings and sensations when triggered can be overwhelming and it is difficult to get untangled from them. It is like we are caught in a storm out at sea, our boat getting blown about by the strong waves and we need to drop our anchor. **Getting caught up in the emotional storm often makes it difficult to act effectively.** Instead, getting back into the present moment or “dropping anchor” helps to avoid getting caught up in an angry emotional experience; therefore, it is less likely that the clients will act on their urges. Below are three simple ways to get present:

Take Ten Breaths

This is a simple exercise to center yourself and connect with your environment. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible until the lungs are completely empty—and then allow them to refill by themselves.
2. Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying. Notice them refilling. Notice your rib cage rising and falling. Notice the gentle rise and fall of your shoulders.
3. See if you can let your thoughts come and go as if they’re just passing cars, driving past outside your house.
4. Expand your awareness: simultaneously notice your breathing and your body. Then look around the room and notice what you can see, hear, smell, touch, and feel.

Drop Anchor

This is another simple exercise to center yourself and connect with the world around you. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Plant your feet into the floor.
2. Push them down—notice the floor beneath you, supporting you.
3. Notice the muscle tension in your legs as you push your feet down.
4. Notice your entire body—and the feeling of gravity flowing down through your head, spine, and legs into your feet.
5. Now look around and notice what you can see and hear around you. Notice where you are and what you're doing.



[Dropping Anchor audio](#)

Notice Five Things

This is yet another simple exercise to center yourself and engage with your environment. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Pause for a moment
2. Look around and notice five things that you can see.
3. Listen carefully and notice five things that you can hear.
4. Notice five things that you can feel in contact with your body (for example, your watch against your wrist, your trousers against your legs, the air on your face, your feet upon the floor, your back against the chair).
5. Finally, do all of the above simultaneously

(Adapted from Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple*)

Mindfulness skills are another way bringing ourselves back to the present moment.

Mindfulness is awareness of both our own thoughts, feelings and sensations (internal experience) as well as the surrounding environment. This noticing is done without judgment on whether things are “right” or “wrong” but rather letting thoughts and feelings be as they are. We are observing and letting go rather than getting all caught up in our internal experience. It is being present in the here and now, not the past or future. Three specific behaviors put together make up mindfulness:

- Notice X
- Let go of your thoughts
- Let your feelings be as they are

The great thing about mindfulness is that it can be practiced both in discrete times we set aside for that purpose (also known as mindfulness meditation) as well as informally when we are going about our day. This might include noticing the feel of the water from the shower, observing the way the coffee tastes, focusing on the sight of a sunset, the sensation of our fingers on the keyboard or being aware of the smell of the candle just lit. We notice, let go of thoughts and allow our feelings to come and go in their own good time. This takes practice but, eventually, living mindfully comes more naturally.

1 [Mindfulness Exercises audio](#)

2 [Mindfulness of Breath audio](#)

There are a multitude of audio exercises for relaxation, grounding and mindfulness on the internet and most can be accessed on the client's smartphone, Youtube and applications such as Headspace or Calm.

Letting Go of Thoughts

Humans live in a constant stream of thoughts which can include those that we consider negative, positive or neutral. For clients who have experienced trauma, there can be many negative thoughts about the safety of the world, trusting others or their own worth. These thoughts also include interpretations of their trauma experience and the images of the stressful event(s). In anger, there might be thoughts about the need to "get even" or "tell the person off." Clients may consider all the ways in which they need to protect themselves from harm. The human mind is very busy and we can often become caught up in what it is saying. However, our thoughts are not necessarily true, wise, important, orders or threats. What if we looked at thoughts as merely sounds, words, stories or bits of language? See them as just thoughts, rather than believe them for exactly what they are telling us. By looking at thoughts this way, we can stop giving them so much power. Clients can work on not getting bullied by or acting on their angry thoughts. Here are two basic steps you can teach your clients to notice and let go of their thoughts:

1. First, notice and label them as thoughts. Adding the phrase "I'm having the thought that..." before our thoughts can instantly remind us that it is just a thought, nothing more, nothing less. It may be helpful to prompt clients by saying, "Notice what your mind is telling you right now." We can liken the mind to a radio giving "doom and gloom," a word machine, a judgment factory, a chatterbox, an inner critic, a demanding bully.

2. Second, imagine the thoughts moving away from our focus. There are many images that can assist in this strategy and we can visualize the thoughts as that image. It may be leaves floating down a stream, clouds passing in the sky, cars passing on the street, bubbles rising into the air, ‘pop-ups’ on the internet or train cars coming and going on the tracks. The possibilities are endless!

To practice this, the mindfulness exercise called “Leaves on a Stream” is very helpful. You can guide clients through this exercise or have them listen to an audio recording. Encourage them to use whatever image they find most helpful throughout the day in order to improve their ability to let go of thoughts. Remember, just because we have a thought does not mean we have to do what it says.

The Leaves on a Stream Exercise

Find a comfortable position, and either close your eyes or fix your eyes on a spot.

Imagine you’re sitting by the side of a gently flowing stream, and there are leaves flowing past on the surface of the stream. Imagine it however you like—it’s your imagination. (Pause 10 seconds.)

Now, for the next few minutes, notice each of your thoughts as it pops into your head ... then place it onto a leaf, and allow it to come and stay and go in its own good time ... Don’t try to make it float away, just notice what it does ... It may float on by quickly, or it may go very slowly, or it may hang around ... Do this regardless of whether the thoughts are positive or negative, pleasurable or painful ... even if they’re the most wonderful thoughts, place them onto a leaf ... and allow them to come and stay and go, in their own good time ... they may float by quickly, or slowly, or they may hang around ... simply notice what happens, without trying to alter it. (Pause 10 seconds.)

If your thoughts stop, just watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again. (Pause 20 seconds.)

Allow the stream to flow at its own rate. Don’t speed it up. You’re not trying to wash the leaves away—you’re allowing them to come and go in their own good time. (Pause 20 seconds.)

If your mind says, *This is stupid or I can’t do it*, place those thoughts on a leaf. (Pause 20 seconds.)

If a leaf gets stuck, let it hang around. Don’t force it to float away. (Pause 20 seconds.)

From time to time, your thoughts will hook you, and pull you out of the exercise, so you lose track of what you are doing. This is normal and natural, and it will keep happening. As soon as you realize it’s happened, gently acknowledge it and then start the exercise again.

Again and again, your thoughts will hook you. This is normal. As soon as you realize it, start up the exercise again.

And now, bring the exercise to an end ... and sit up in your chair ... and open your eyes. Look around the room ... and notice what you can see and hear ... and take a stretch. Welcome back!

(Adapted from Russ Harris, *ACT Made Simple*)



[Leaves on a Stream audio](#)

Communicating Anger Effectively

There are many situations in a workplace that need to be addressed and would be detrimental to the clients if left unacknowledged. Therefore, it is important to assist them in finding assertive ways to express themselves when there is a conflict. Some clients who have experienced trauma may believe that it is not only okay to express their anger, but it is *required* in order to protect themselves. Others may believe it is not okay to express their anger due to the fear it evokes or not knowing what to say. If the former, clients may disrupt relationships. If the latter, they may keep it inside building up resentment in the process until it finally comes tumbling in an ineffective or aggressive way.

What is assertive communication? Using appropriate words and behavior to approach the conflict and move towards a mutually beneficial solution. However, it must be emphasized that although communicating assertively provides the best chance of working out the issues it is not a guarantee. We can use all the skills in the world and it does not necessarily mean that we will be “successful” in getting what we need. Being assertive means that we communicate directly, honestly and appropriately. By using the following techniques, clients can share their feelings without ruining the important work relationships that they depend on.

1 [Progressive Muscle Relaxation audio](#)

2 [Guide on Assertive Communication](#)

[\[Developing an Assertive Response pdf\]](#)

“I-Statements”

“I feel _____ (emotion) _____ when you _____ (facts of behavior) _____ because _____ (effect on your life). And I would like _____ (what you would like instead) _____.”

This assertive response always begins with an emotion, a feeling (i.e., angry, upset, annoyed, confused, frustrated, hurt). Without that, it loses its efficacy. Stating something like, “I feel that you should treat me better” implies criticism. Sharing a feeling shares information about the person: “I feel frustrated.” When sharing the behavior that upset the client, it is important to share it in as objective terms as possible, just the facts. It may be tempting to begin judging the other person but that will only distract attention from the client’s purpose. The section of sharing the effect on their life assists the other person in understanding why it caused the feelings that it did. And lastly, it more helpful to provide the other person with something that could be done in place of the previous behavior rather than something they need to take away (i.e., “Stop planning my trips for me). Here is an example:

“John, I felt confused and a little annoyed when I found out you’d planned a trip for me but didn’t check with me first because I committed to another project. That team is depending on me. I’d like to talk with you about how we can do the scheduling together for my future trips.”