

Catharsis and Anger

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Dealing with anger in psychotherapy is one of the more difficult things to do, and yet it is one of the most common emotions that one comes across. When someone feels angry that means they perceive they have in some way been hurt or mistreated by someone or something. That mistreatment may have occurred just recently or it may have occurred many years ago.

If the maltreatment was not significant then it can just be let go of and the person does not have to do much at all. If the maltreatment was significant then the person must do some thing with the resultant anger. (Remember this is quite personal. What is significant and insignificant can vary greatly from person to person.)



This elephant feels unfairly treated

Once one is feeling angry then the person can:

- 1) express the anger and
- 2) then let it go and forgive the protagonist

Both these are not that easy to achieve, but once done the person has got over

the event and can move on. They will not be encumbered by emotions about the event in the future to any significant degree. In psychotherapy this is sometimes called "anger work". There are many alternate ways to do anger work and they can be seen to be at different levels or intensities.

Level 1. Fantasy. The client is encouraged to develop fantasies around the expression of anger. That fantasy can be simply thinking such things or writing them, drawing them and so on. The person can then relate the fantasy and report on his feelings. This is particularly useful for clients who are scared of anger for some reason, or they may be scared of their own anger and where it may take them.



Drawing pictures of ones anger is a good start.

Level 2. Verbal anger expression. The client can imagine the other party in front of them and begin verbalising their thoughts and feelings at them. With the correct prompting it is surprising how rapidly people can begin to experience their anger.

This non-physical method of anger expression is useful when the person has issues around anger and physical violence. It is also a good beginning to someone who needs to progress onto the physical methods of anger expression.



Verbalising anger is most peoples' first approach to dealing with angry feelings

Level 3. Social Confrontation 1. In this case the client experiments with the therapist or another group member. The client and therapist place their hands on the other's shoulders and give each other pushes in turn and can say things such as "You wont - I will". One needs to progress carefully and monitor the client's feelings.

This is good for assertiveness problems and for those who want to convert anger into assertion. The basic action is to - push away - which is good for those who have issues around breaking away and being separate. This may be useful for people who as a child was smothered and discouraged from being separate from mother. The parents who did not want the child to break the symbiosis.

Level 4. Social Confrontation 2. Client and therapist each hold the end of a twisted towel. Client is encouraged to breathe deeply, to feel the anger come into their arms and to begin tugging on the towel. The other party then tugs back with equal vigour.

This is good for those who feel more comfortable to express anger by pulling on something. This can be useful for those with a history of being ignored, discounted, put down and treated as though they have little importance. In

addition it may bring up issues about things like possession, ownership and jealousy.

Level 5. Controlled Catharsis.

a) Bataca fighting. In this case both the therapist and the client have batacas or foam anger bats. A time limit of 20 to 30 seconds is set. Both parties hit each other blow for blow and can verbalise what they want. Ground rules define where and how hitting can occur, such as no hitting on the head or genitals. Work with the feelings when client is finished.



b) Bataca hitting. With bataca in hand client kneels before a stool or large cushion and breathes deeply. Then hit down once expelling the air and saying words. Report on the feeling. Then hit twice and report on the feeling. Then they can proceed as they feel they need to. Client stops when he feels he needs to which is usually less than 1 or 2 minutes.

This is good for passive-aggressive problems. In such cases invite the client to start out by saying "It isn't fair" and invite escalation until anger is experienced. When the issue is pre-verbal the person may feel more 'right' just making sounds rather than words.

Level 6. Protected catharsis. Restraint.

The client lies face up on a mattress. Group members hold down firmly on calf's, thighs, upper and lower arms of the person. Someone also holds the head for

stability. The client is encouraged to feel the restraint. They then begin to struggle against the restraint and verbalise what ever they want. The group members are to resist the struggle and maintain the restraint on the client. At times the client can struggle quite vigorously. When the client relaxes the group members remove the restraint on the client. The clients feelings are addressed and worked through.

This is particularly useful for clients with pre-verbal anger issues. Those who feel they have been repressed, held down or held onto by the parents. People from abusive back grounds often feel this way. The abuse feels like it has restrained, repressed or controlled them. It is also applicable for highly controlled people and those who think compulsively.

People who go through this level of catharsis can become very regressed so the therapist needs to know what he is doing and how to deal with highly regressed clients. You need to have the time and the resources to be able to manage the client after the catharsis, so this type of technique is best suited for a residential weekend therapy group.

Also it is a highly emotional experience for anyone in the room particularly those doing the restraining. It is very rare in everyday life to experience the degree and intensity of emotion that such a therapeutic technique can elicit. Also sometimes there is varying amounts of sweat, snot, saliva and language that is not for the ears of the faint hearted. So the restrainers can also have strong emotional reactions to such a piece of work. One needs to take the time to assess and debrief each of those who restrained the client.

Anger work in context

Deciding when and how to do anger work with a client is not an easy therapeutic judgement to make. There is no clear formula to follow. The problem with anger expression techniques is that they can be done over and over again and not get anywhere. They are not an end in themselves. They are used as one part of the overall treatment plan. They provide the client with a means to experience and express the anger inside them. That experience then needs to be taken and used therapeutically to lead to behaviour and script change. At some point the person must forgive the 'abuser' and then they can forget and they are released from the past.

Chronic anger

In psychology there are two schools of thought about how you deal with anger.

1. Catharsis - Feel the feeling
2. Cognitive-behavioural approach - Think about the feeling

In the previous post I showed a variety of ways how the feeling of anger can be expressed. This is the cathartic expression of the emotion. Obviously in the cognitive solution one does not do this. Instead one finds a solution by thinking it through. There are many possible methods to do this. Here is one of them.

Cognitive solution to anger

1. Identify times when you feel angry. Identify patterns and early warning signs.
2. Identify the self talk that feeds the anger. What do you say to yourself when you feel angry. Do you blame others or feel a loss of control.
"Others are so selfish"
"This is unfair"
"I can't cope with this"
3. Create more useful self talk. Own your anger and learn to control it.
"Focus on the problem"
"I can discuss without arguing"
4. Plan new ways to express self
Say what you want, and what you don't want. Make requests rather than demands.
5. When provoked calm self down.
Tell yourself "anger is a signal to relax".
Consciously relax muscles
6. Evaluate how it went and plan for next time

As you can see very different to the catharsis approach. There is no expressing the feeling instead there is thinking about the feeling.

Case against catharsis - Chronic anger

One of the main arguments against the expression of anger approach is that by doing such a thing you are actually encouraging anger and people tend to get chronically angry. The actual expressing of the anger becomes almost addictive or at least habitual. Of course the cognitive behavioural approach does not do this, it certainly discourages habitually expressing anger.

It seems reasonable to say that the catharsis approach could do this. This can happen in psychotherapy where clients do 'anger work' regularly and it has no therapeutic goal. It is done because it is believed that just by doing it then the person will alter the way they think and feel. This is indeed seductive, because

for many if they just express anger then they often feel a sense of relief afterwards. The problem is it is only short term and nothing has changed, so you have to keep doing it. So if the anger work is put in a therapeutic context that leads to a therapeutic goal then there will not be the development of chronic anger.

I have met people who come to see me because they want to deal with the ex-partner that they are angry at. Upon closer examination one finds that they have been divorced for ten years and have been expressing such anger about him/her for that period of time. This person is sometimes referred to as the 'group jockey'. The person who goes from therapy group to therapy group and 'works on' the same material over and over. Unfortunately they tend to get away with it for some time at least because it is also to the financial advantage of the group therapist.

The other way groups can lead to chronic anger is when the expression of anger gets caught up in a game of 'Ain't it awful" or "Poor me". If the woman in the group is expressing anger at the ex-husband who has reportedly been doing all sorts of mistreatment of her, naturally other group members will tend to sympathise with her and this can very easily lead onto, how awful the husband is and how she was just an innocent victim of his torment.



Some people have learnt to get strokes by having a "wooden leg" or a permanent broken heart. This can feed the development of chronic anger

One needs to be very careful with this as it can easily become a rich supply of strokes for her being the victim who is justifiably angry at her ex-husband. If this happens then you will tend to get a chronic anger situation, as the anger and strokes get caught up together. So it is a fine line for the therapist to walk. Without a doubt the support from the other group members can be very therapeutic and yet at times things can cross over that line and become a game like "Poor Me".

Anger for anger's sake

When I am at home cooking my dinner I sometimes listen to the radio. One show that comes on is by a shock jock and it is largely a talk back kind of thing. Each show starts with the words from that very powerful piece of acting by Peter Finch. He played Howard Beale in the 1976 movie - Network. He is a newscaster who makes the very powerfully delivered statement;

"So, I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out and yell,
"I'm as mad as hell,
and I'm not going to take this anymore!!!"



My response to that is, why? What does it achieve? It provides a cathartic release, but if the person does not deal with what made him mad in the first place then he is going to have to do that over and over again and thus we have the development of chronic anger.

This disc jockey then asks listeners to ring up and do the same, tell the world

what they are 'mad as hell' about. And they do, and they get angry at what ever the topic is for that day. But nothing is ever achieved. How can they change their view of society's ills so that they don't get so mad? Questions like this are never addressed. But it is a good example of anger for angers sake and he usually does quite well in the ratings. This would seem to suggest that there are some chronically angry people out there

Thinking about feeling

One argument against the thinking about feelings or the cognitive approach to feelings is that it can lead to the suppression of emotions. In psychology three things come up time and again that are important for healthy human functioning.

The first is a sense of hope. When people have a sense of hope about solving their problems whether that be financial problems, depression, cancer or whatever then they are much better off psychologically. For example the research shows a common link between a sense of hopelessness and poor survival rates from cancer.



Sometimes however there is false hope

The second is social support. A person who feels emotionally supported by those around them is also better off psychologically. If the person feels like they are emotionally connected to others then they will cope better than those who have a sense of isolation.

Finally there is the notion of emotional expression. People who express their emotions, that is have cathartic displays are also better off emotionally than those who suppress the expression of emotion. This is where the cognitive approach comes under a bit of fire as they do not promote the expression of emotion, in fact they do the opposite. Indeed there is a considerable body of research that links suppressed anger with cancer, particularly in women. So there is some scientific evidence about the advantages of expressing ones feelings openly.



There are some quite strong prohibitions against the expression of anger in the western world