



## Is “Anger Management” for me?

*by Donald Woolfson*

What do Naomi Campbell, Hugh Grant and Amy Winehouse have in common?

They all suffer from anger and can make all those around them suffer too. The truth is we all experience anger to a greater or lesser degree. The problem is that anger has a bad name. As soon as someone famous “kicks off” in public my phones start ringing and don’t stop till the next person provides new column inches.

Anger can be expressed many ways and has many outlets. In the music, film and entertainment industry there are many examples of public angry behavior. Acting out anger often compounds the feelings that drive it and until the person is able to stop and look at things the problem tends to get worse. Unfortunately it gets a lot of attention as well. Although anger is in itself just a feeling, just like sadness or hurt, many clients come to me believing that anger is a “bad” thing. The real problem is not feeling anger but how it is played out in your life.

There are two basic ways of showing anger. The most visible form is “exploding”, and this is what gets the headlines for people in the public eye. Exploders suffer from temper outbursts. Their behavior often gets progressively worse, putting work and family life in danger. They often do not trust others and have difficulty expressing their deepest feelings; this is expressed in their anger. Even worse, their angry actions in public create a stereotype of who they are which puts more pressure on them, they feel less “seen” and misunderstood. These feelings create a “spiral of anger” which becomes increasingly intense. The other form of showing anger is “imploding” in which anger is buried deep – sometimes for years – and then emerges unexpectedly. Imploders hide their “shameful” and angry feelings. They express them through passive aggression and obstruction - not doing something. This is “anger through the back door”. Holding in angry feelings can take a lot of effort and it is not surprising that often drives self-destructive behavior both in public and more often behind closed doors.

When we feel angry it tells us something is wrong. The anger instinct is a primitive survival mechanism and can be useful. I know that when my life was threatened I was twice as strong and could run twice as fast. When we are angry the primitive “fight, flight, freeze” response takes over as hormones

flood the body, increasing blood pressure and pulse rate. It is efficient and does this within milliseconds of being triggered. It impairs the cortex, impeding communication, rational decisions and problem solving. Above 100 heartbeats per minute it is hard to hear, let alone process what another person is saying. We get “hijacked” by anger and frustration and are no longer in control of our actions.

The problem arises when there is no physical threat but the anger response kicks in anyway. When this happens our response to a minor event will be to fight for survival when the threat may not be “real”. For example when someone gives you a “funny look” in the bar. Every weekend this is responsible for countless fights. In reality there may not have been a funny look at all but we feel shamed or judged and respond aggressively to justify our feelings.

I work confidentially with clients from every walk of life from pop stars to plumbers. No matter how rich, powerful or famous you may be, the feelings that drive anger tend not to go away until you own up that there is a problem, take the time to self reflect and engage with the feelings and beliefs that are driving your anger. This is half the battle. Anger is the symptom and shame is the cause. It’s a feeling that you have been somehow cursed and are not like other people. However successful you are there is a sense of being flawed and defective as a human being that “If you really knew me, you wouldn’t like me.” Amy Winehouse in a short period of time lashed out at a security guard, punched a man in the face and carried out a series of angry outbursts. Angry people tend to point the finger of blame at others and make them feel what we are feeling. The truth is that – to a greater or lesser degree – we carry round our anger in a sack often just looking for an excuse to act it out.

The first step in Anger Management is to look at the behavior which is causing problems. This can lead to anything from swearing, and sulking to door-kicking, window-punching, self harm and direct violence towards others. It can be habitual and addictive especially when a person is in a position of some status and power over others and can get away with their behavior. To manage anger we have to get to know it. Simple short term measures can control temper outbursts, road rage and bullying. By acknowledging the physical symptoms, we can learn to predict the explosions.



**“We carry round our anger... looking for an excuse to act it out.”**

Sometimes getting angry can make you feel strong and powerful at the time. Afterwards you tend to feel shame. This feeling drives the next anger incident. Naomi Campbell has been making the headlines for years. She has assaulted her assistants, police officers and limo drivers. In the first stage of work, after a short time, it is usual to realize that there is “light at the end of the tunnel”. This can itself be transformative bringing feelings of peace and wellbeing based on the sense on the realization that change is possible and that it has a shape and direction.

The second step is to look at the feelings and opinions that drive anger. These tend to be historic. Engaging with our own past trauma, is challenging, exiting, scary, creative. Many artists express and explore their anger and their historic shadows in their work – as well as their behavior. Everything from Oasis’ “Don’t Look Back in Anger” which is in many ways a reflective comment about letting go of anger from the past to Len-



non's "Mother You Had Me but I Never Had You" – a roar of historic anger still manifesting in the present. Naomi Campbell blames her rage on her lingering resentment towards her father for abandoning her, the shame of her rejection as a child. This blaming is part of the problem. Our challenge when dealing with historic traumas is to stop blaming, which takes the heat and responsibility off ourselves and to take "ownership" of our feelings and behavior. We avoid facing our own shame through behaviors such as perfectionism, control, criticism, moralizing and blame. We need to accept that the authentic self, the part we hideaway is often not very easy to accept and may not be very pleasant. But by accepting our shadow-self, the parts we don't really like, we accept our humanity.

Anger can be positive. It can drive us to do great things – run marathons, fight for justice, perform for thousands of people and climb the highest mountains. The challenge is to embrace this form of anger and heal the "punishing, powerless" sort. Working with a skilled Anger Management therapist is an opportunity to control behavior which causes problems, bring hidden feelings out of hiding and feel happier and more peaceful. It takes courage to make the first step, to own up to having a problem rather than looking back in anger. The rewards can be immeasurable. ■

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