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Anger Management: Reflections on
NCJRS a Program for Assaultive Youthful Offenders

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ACQUISITIONS

The Lane County (Eugene, Oregon) Department of Youth Services began to explore anger management as a competency that juvenile offenders should develop when the Balanced Approach (Maloney, Romig & Armstrong, 1988) was integrated into the department's philosophy in 1989. The Balanced Approach, is known for its advocacy of the following purpose :

> The purpose of juvenile probation is to protect the community from delinquency, to impose account-ability for offenses committed, and to equip juvenile offenders with the required competencies to live productively and responsibly in the community.
> (Maloney et al, p. 10)

Along with several other competencies, anger management serves to fulfill the third mission of the Balanced Approach.

Background to the Lane County Model

Over the last two years anger management groups have grown from one small group meeting twice weekly to more than nine groups in the larger community, one group in juvenile detention and as many as two large groups meeting twice a week in the department. In addition, outgrowths of Lane County's model have been incorporated into the curriculums of many local schools. The program has even crossed state lines.

The current model of anger management, designed for violent offenders, consists of two ninety-minute sessions twice a week for eight weeks. Successful graduates of the program must have participated in the course, done their homework and demonstrated specific competencies in role-plays. Presently, about 45% of students entering the course graduate. Consequently, each eight-week course includes students who have previously attended one or more other courses.

Research and Effectiveness

Lane County Department of Youth Services studied 94 anger management students who participated in consecutive groups that ran from June 13, 1989 to December 6, 1990. The data on these students was analyzed in two phases: the first in January, 1991 and the second in September, 1991. In the second phase eight months were added to the pre- and post-test periods of the study. Suppression calculations (Austin, Joe, Krisberg & Steele, 1990) show that "completers" demonstrated significant suppression effects (-75.6% in the first phase of the study; -68.6% in the second phase), especially compared to those who did not attend after referral (-62.6% in the first phase; -59.7% in the second phase) or those who dropped out (-30.6% in the first phase; -29.3% in the second phase). Completers who went on to commit more crimes committed less severe crimes than those in the other two groups, even though the severity of their original crimes was

greatest. Among the completers more cases were terminated (dropped as cases active with the Court) than among the other comparison groups combined, even though the other combined groups were larger. In the two phases of analysis 54% of completers' cases were terminated, whereas only 16% of those who did not show and 22% of the dropped cases were terminated. Only the group of completers had no new police referrals after their cases were terminated.

Conceptual Foundations of Anger Management

While it is premature to state exactly what contributes to the success of this program, a preliminary observation may be advanced: anger management completers learn to more fully appreciate themselves as choosing and emotional human beings. In a delinquent population, anger serves as a pivotal emotion, valued over m:st alternative modes of expression. Anger supplies a magnificent means of defense. The delinquent population that has been referred to the anger management program is usually adept at expressions of anger and poorly trained to express or claim a broad range of other emotions. It is commonly stated that students begin the group with a range of three emotions: "good," mad and horny.

Anger management students tend to feel that their anger is justified by powerful overlying beliefs that they are essentially powerless victims. "You made me mad" or "It really pissed me off that..." are expressions of this victim psychology. A frequent exercise in the early part of the course based on the prompt, "Talk about the last time you got angry," is designed to highlight this kind of victim thinking.

With guidance, anger management students learn to talk about their anger and the choices associated with it through a dialectic that emphasizes risks and options. The dialectic process, whereby two opposing forces resolve themselves into a new way of thinking, promotes change. They learn to understand anger as a process or cycle with recognizable components, not "something that happens to you." Rather than the circumstances of victimization, anger management teaches students to enlarge upon a growing appreciation of responsibility.

The Cycle/Process of Anger

Invitations
The anger cycle begins with what we call an invitation. This term accentuates the element of choice in circumstances, events or intentional acts that seem to provoke anger. An invitation may be an obscene gesture, a profanity, an unreasonable demand or any of an infinity of actions or circumstances that may be interpreted as provocative. Students begin management of their anger when they learn to recognize invitations, then associate them with choices. Like an invitation to a party, an invitation to anger need not be accepted. At least two full hours of each course sequence are devoted to explorations of invitations in anger stories until large numbers and varieties of invitations are listed on wall charts.

The Early Warning System

The Early Warning System is a set of idiosyncratic feelings and physical manifestations that precede anger. Students usually begin with denials that these precursors of anger exist. To confront this issue, the question is frequently posed in class, "what happened before you got angry?"

Physical signs of impending anger may include a flushed complexion, a facial tic, a nervous smile, a change in breathing, guttural noises, altered posture or intense eye contact. Among the feelings may be hurt, anxiety, threat, fear, surprise, or a wide variety of other emotions.

Students usually find that their familiar emotional range is quite limited. Lists of emotions are generated by the group and placed on the walls of the meeting room. Facilitators encourage students to discuss these feelings instead of their anger. Facilitators stress that anger should be reserved as an option for very special, overwhelmingly dangerous circumstances.

The physical signs component of the Early Warning System often provides an inroad to the emotions. Many students feel estranged from their feelings; they become accessible only after physical signs have been identified. Students are often asked to notice and label each others' obvious physical signs.

Suggestive Thoughts

Taken from Rational Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1990) and other anger programs (e.g. Weisinger, 1985; Hankins, 1988; Mckay, Rogers & McKay, 1989), suggestive thoughts refer to the self-talk that accompanies the anger cycle, especially in the early stages. (We have found that this component of the cycle is best addressed in advanced groups that have already mastered the basic anger management program outlined in this paper.)

Engagement / Anger

Anger conveys the impression of interpersonal engagement. It is intensely personal, often accompanied by intoxicating impressions of personal power. Self-loathing and a disregard for the future usually accompany anger; it is the quintessential emotion of the present moment. Students familiar with justifications for their anger tend to slowly acknowledge problems of self-worth and reckless disregard for consequences as they come to understand their own anger. These issues emerge from guided group discussions of the question, "What happened the last time you got angry?"

Consequences and Recovery

Students are usually acquainted with the cycle components of consequences and recovery. These subjects flow from answers to the omnipresent question, "Is your present way of doing business working for you?" Consequences of anger may include blackouts, imprisonment, losses of relationships and significant monetary expenses. Recovery may include apologies, guilt, or obsequiousness- qualities that may lead right back to the Early Warning System.

Management of Anger

Once the Early Warning System is understood, students are prepared to exit the cycle before moving to anger. Even after they learn to correctly label invitations, they feel less pressured to respond to them in accustomed ways. When they receive an invitation or feel the onset of the Early Warning System they can stop and think. In each instance we teach that they have at least three choices (as opposed to the typical two of the "fight or flight" response or what students refer to as "kick ass or kiss ass"). A choice is always available that sacrifices neither self-respect nor respect for others.

Many students assume that they are being taught to ignore provocations. We ask of them a more demanding regimen: Show enough self-respect and courage to face challenges, only do so with boldness and compassion. Halfway through the course we begin each class session with the question, "What have you done that was courageous?" Here courage is defined not just as the ability to conquer fear or despair, but as the course that is rarely easy and the way that requires caring.

Taking Space

The next step in anger management demands identification of the first emotion (not anger, but fear, anxiety, hurt), a statement of that emotion, an intent to take time out, a commitment to return within a specified period of time and a promise to resolve the pending difficulty at that time. In practice, taking space may sound like this: "I'm beginning to feel really hurt right now and I need some space so I can handle it. I'll be back in ten minutes to work this out with you." Note that no one is blamed when space is taken appropriately, nor are instructions given to another person. The development of this skill requires practice in and out of class. Physical departure is an option; however, disengagement may be accomplished psychologically.

Grounding And Centering

Grounding and centering usually take place while physically or psychologically removed from the source of stress. In grounding the student relaxes posture and carriage, breathes deeply and permits or strives for a feeling of calm. Grounding is often a ritual that opens and closes group meetings.

Students typically enjoy centering and learn to use it enthusiastically. They are expected to devise the components of centering in class and exercise them repeatedly, most often in conjunction with grounding. The three parts of the centering process are attention-getters, affirmations and unhooks.

Attention-getters are simply that: verbal or nonverbal cues to remove attention from the provocative persons or incidents. Students have successfully employed attention-getters such as "It's not worth it," "I don't need this," "the judge's face," "I don't want to be handcuffed again" or "____ it."

Affirmations are difficult for many students because they are carefully defined as something that can be said about oneself that is always positive and always true; students find it easier to declare, "Oh, the hell with it" and proceed with anger. However, with support and direction they can learn simple affirmations such as "I like myself," "I'm a good friend," "I'm going to let good things happen to me," "I'm a good mechanic," "I can hoop" or even "I'm going to let peace into my life." With practice in the group simple affirmations can grow into careful articulations of self-esteem.

Unhooks are verbal or conceptual tools to release provocative incidents, placing them in realistic perspective. They have included "Let it go," "Cut the chain" (as in I'm chained to this cycle and I want to stop), "Drop it" and "2091" (a reminder that present issues will become insignificant in time).

If they choose not to become angry the centering tools provide students with more choices. They are usually required to give three attention-getters, three affirmations and three unhooks in rapid succession before they can graduate. The skill is best practiced in actual conflict, the focus of guidance in the group's later stages.

Graduation

Finally, students take what they have learned and participate in a graduation exercise that consists of a review, completed by at least one realistic role-play. Role-plays are tailored by group leaders to test the skills that students will be called upon to employ in their own lives. They may involve confrontations following criminal acts with police, teachers, parents or challenging peers. In other cases, no crime allegations are included, but students confront the implications of their reputations, including consequences like lack of trust and lingering suspicions of criminal complicity. To graduate, students must demonstrate abilities to think clearly under stressful circumstances and to defuse potentially angry or violent confrontations.

Role-plays might include conflicts with authority figures such as police, parents or school administrators. Students may face angry crime victims or encounter betrayals of trusted peers. They may be confronted about crimes they actually committed. Choices of role-plays are virtually infinite.

To graduate, students must demonstrate respect for themselves and their antagonists, usually meaning that they must permit themselves to be viewed as vulnerable and human. Successful graduates are able to persuade their antagonists that the desire to struggle has been purged.

Group Facilitation

In Lane County, anger management is usually facilitated by three counselors from the Department of Youth Services. Facilitators are teachers and group leaders who empower students in the development of anger management skills and group maintenance. Everything asked of the group is done by the leaders; they are part of the group.

By the halfway point in any group most students who find themselves unwilling or unable to continue work on significant issues have already dropped out. It has been our

experience that some of the most hardened delinquents become committed to the group at this point, when we ask students to answer these specific questions: How successful have you been in group? If graduation were today, would you graduate? What do you need to do or improve to graduate? How can you help the group? What can the group do to help you?

We use group consequences to build cohesiveness. When the group becomes unmanageable and members do not discipline each other, they are sent home as if absent, as a group. Because they can afford only two absences, this is a powerful incentive.

For the past year we have employed graduates, still on probation, to help facilitate the group. Group members are impressed by their uses of the curriculum and their willingness to share how they learned it.

Other Benefits of Anger Management

Enthusiasm for continued work with this delinquent population has increased for us because of participation in anger management. Our roles with these young people have been strengthened. We are more trusted. We take definite pride in our graduates who have discovered their parents as human beings; in those who risked the realization that they were worthwhile and therefore capable of courageous acts; in those who have not only ended their delinquent and violent patterns, but in some cases, have testified against delinquent peers because they found it caring to do so; in those who have discovered that life is far more than endless battle. In some instances we began with delinquency cases and finished with colleagues and friends.

For more information about the program, contact the authors at the Lane County Department of Youth Services, 2411 Centennial Boulevard, Eugene, Oregon 97401. (503) 341-4700.

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