

RESEARCH REPORT

Anger Is Okay: My Reactions Are Not Always Okay

Barbara McNish

I became curious as to why the anger group “Just the Tip of the Iceberg” that I was facilitating was succeeding. The women are required to complete a 20-hour workshop and write a letter to the Court or to their worker, explaining what they have gained or learned in this process. I was interested to find out how the presentation of material was making the difference.

When asked at the very beginning of group about their goals, the most common answer was that they wanted some tools to use to express their anger so that they would not get in trouble. They wanted to know why some people made them really angry and then they “lost it.” The women who attended made comments such as “Everyone should take this course,” and “I went home and told my partner, and we actually talked.” One woman who had come from work told me, “For the first time in a long time, I was not pissed off at my job.” Did these remarks mean that the group had some value? These comments and questions brought me to a place of reflection about the group, and I wanted to explore why it seemed to be effective.

Research Question

My research question was, “What are the components in this “Just the Tip of the Iceberg” anger group that are working and that motivate women to make changes that are life altering or shifting?”

Data Collection

Field Notes from Classroom Observation

I collected data from the field notes that I gathered over the course of the 20-hour workshops. This observation of nonverbal communication and insight was helpful in my field note taking. The discussions with individuals were part of these notes as the women shared some of their stories, thoughts, and feelings outside the official group.

Group Evaluation Form

The participants completed anonymous evaluations at the end of each workshop. This feedback helped the facilitator gain insight into what worked, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the group. The evaluation form included questions such as “What has this group helped you realize about yourself?” and “What have you learned about you and anger?” The answers yielded data that could be used to adjust the course content in order to meet the needs of the women attending the group.

Field Notes from Casual Conversation

I acquired some further information from past clients, the legal system, and colleagues who have facilitated groups. These casual conversations were verbal, but after each conversation I recorded accurate field notes.

Feedback from Self-Evaluation on the Group Experience

The women wrote a letter "To Whom It May Concern," and the feedback from these letters was useful to pull data from their viewpoints on the progression of changes within themselves as they attended the group. Throughout each workshop, the women were continually asked to self-evaluate their learning process.

Feedback from Checkouts at the End of Each Session

At the end of each group session, we did a checkout that asked these questions: "What would you say was one thing you will take away from the group?" and "From all the sessions you have attended, what do you want to share with the group that really just made a difference for you?"

Findings

Theme 1: Knowledge/Learning

The skills or tools that the group members found most useful were the "I" messages. The women learned that a sentence with "you" is a blame message and shuts off communication or puts the other person into a place of defensiveness or attack mode. This was a huge eye opener for the women. They learned that "I feel" and "I need" statements could be used at home. A deeper and more complete understanding of the old messages, beliefs, and thoughts is a very basic tool to begin to uncover some of the hidden hurts, or core beliefs, that are exposed by communication styles and responses that are given out to others. This knowledge is the beginning of self-awareness, the understanding that the triggers beneath anger are old thoughts or messages.

The workbook was also seen as a tool. The facilitators did not look at the book or the women's answers to any of the exercises. It was used as a personal response journal. The women felt comfortable recording and owning their own thoughts and feelings, and began being as truthful to themselves as they needed. It was their process, and they needed to own it. This was a powerful knowledge tool to be reused again and again.

Theme 2: Awareness

To reinforce awareness, body cues were broken down into levels. The levels were coloured on a body map. A three-level scale was used whereby low is yellow, medium is orange and high is red. The women have a temperature gauge; they interpreted their body cues and started to look at how the temperature rose with non-intervention skills. They discovered that it is easier to intervene in the yellow or orange area. The idea that anger is okay was reaffirmed, but violent or hurtful responses or actions were not acceptable. The goal was to learn self-calming tools so that the women would not reach their boiling point. Each step helped them to learn another skill to decrease the negative behaviours.

Once the building blocks of old messages, body cues, and understanding reasons for their anger were in place, then the feelings and thoughts that are associated with the cues and the reactions were explored. The group began to understand the consequences of their reactions as they discovered the similarity between the iceberg and anger. The feelings produced a reaction and now there was a consequence to those reactions. The women were amazed with the connections, and took that next step to embrace their learning and internalize the information in order to start shifting some of their thinking.

This process awoke something inside them and taught them that they had tools to use. It was exciting for the women, and that gave them hope of change. The women learned about slowly breaking down the cycle to give them some thinking time before reacting. Owning and accepting responsibility for their actions was an eye-opening moment.

Drawing an iceberg was important to show a connection to what is hidden under the surface. Just like a ship that may sink if it hits an iceberg, so might the relationships of the women. This awareness of self and even others was a helpful stage of the group process and was like team-building skills. The leadership role was now seen as having value, and the learning was embraced by most of the individual group members.

Theme 3: Responsibility

The women explained that knowing that anger is a choice was a powerful message. Anger is a choice, so they needed to choose proper actions, manage stress levels, and keep boundaries intact. In choosing their actions carefully, by slowing down, taking a time out, the women could change some things. They could work on accepting the things that they could not change and learn to say “No.”

Theme 4: Abuse in Relationships

The women learned about domestic violence and the new laws related to family violence. They looked at the abusive part they themselves might have played in a relationship that was unhealthy. We discussed children and how they are affected when parents are fighting. The women discussed their own experiences from their own childhood.

Theme 5: Acceptance

If you listen and actually hear someone, will that impact how you learn? If you invest in people by building trust and encouragement, how will those qualities influence how you want to invest in your own learning?

The women liked the personal stories. They stated, “Sometimes it feels like you lived in my house because that is how it sounds when you talk about anger.” They said, “It feels like you understand me and know exactly what I am going through, and I am reassured that I am not alone.” They now felt like they were accepted and not judged. The use of self-disclosure is a very powerful tool to encourage women to see that change is possible.

Theme 6: New Ways

The women believed that they had changed themselves, and they liked it. They had a new way to react. The whole process came back to understanding their anger, knowing their own triggers, body cues, thoughts, feelings, and being able to express those all in a respectful way. It is “okay to be angry but it is never okay to hurt someone, yourself, or something in your anger” is a mantra that is used in the group. What is going on for them and how they respond in a safe way for all is important information on their own self-awareness.

When facilitating this group, it was important to engage the audience and draw from the experiences that were common to the clients, in order to build an understanding. Identifying with the women and showing compassion were valuable to this cohesion in the process.

Interconnection, incorporation, and internalization of the information shared in the group brought an awareness and insight into the possibility of change for the women. When women feel like they have hope and are not alone, they have an acceptance and non-judgmental response to why their action or behaviours have caused them to have to attend an anger management group. These are powerful realizations that provide motivation to change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to the question of what is it that makes this group so successful or at least sustainable. What works is making women feel accepted, giving them tools and skills, telling stories, giving personal examples so they can see the dynamics of how it works, and giving the women handouts that they can refer back to and practise with. It is important to let the women know that they are okay and that change is possible. When someone believes in you, then you begin to believe in yourself, too, and that produces change. Active interventions with goals that are personalized to the women rather than theory directed, and conversation from the women's world view, were incorporated into a learning opportunity.

This group data supports this viewpoint and works toward the brief solution focus, choice therapy, and WDEP models. When given the tools, encouragement, and support, change is possible if the women have the confidence to use the skills that they have already have within them. Perhaps the answer to the question about why this group works is that the women want to change and they have fun doing it along with the skilled facilitators. Storytelling and self-disclosure can be used to form an alliance that says, "I understand and I have some tools that can help you."

About the Author

Barbara McNish is in Brandon University's graduate diploma program, specializing in guidance and counselling. She works as a woman's counsellor and facilitates the anger group for woman. She has worked in the field of counselling for the past twenty years. Barbara enjoys researching genealogy, seeking family history, and travel experiences.