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“Focussing on process in anger management groups”

This abstract touches on the self-development process students are guided through during an anger management program spanning six 2 ½ hour sessions (3 at level 1 GCO and 3 at level 2 GCO). The course draws upon a range of therapeutic techniques such as narrative therapy, rational emotive therapy and simulations to assist students recognise, understand and alter negative patterns of anger. Requirements of the course are that students rehearse anger management techniques between classes and report this experience back to the group; and keep a journal of work completed within class, and ways they can apply this learning to their specific contexts.

Because the course targets inmates in remand the emphasis is experiential, which requires teachers to tap into student experiences of anger from the initial session. This creates an environment in which students can examine and alter self-defeating patterns from the onset of the course. Teachers require a non-judgemental attitude, group facilitation skills, flexibility, and sound active listening skills to facilitate this program. The teacher also needs to feel comfortable shifting the learning from a cognitive level to a more physical/emotional level in which the students stare into the mirror of their own anger and glimpse its reflection back on their lives. The following anecdotes from actual sessions best demonstrate this approach in practice.

“Clench your fists, tense every muscle in your body, screw up your face, clench your chin, and grit your teeth. Hold this posture for at least thirty seconds whilst thinking about a situation you have felt angry about, then turn to the person next to you and ask if they’re having a nice day”

Usually the students laugh when firstly, I demonstrate this pose, and secondly I ask them to repeat it. “You look ridiculous” or “I’d be too embarrassed” they often say. However, after acting it out, then stretching and shaking to remove the tension, there is a clearer sense that intense anger is physical, and until the tension in the body is released there is little hope of problem-solving or conflict resolution. It also emphasises the obvious, that anger is visible, even when the answer to “what’s the matter?” is a sullen “NOTHING”.

In a short sharp anger management program for inmates on remand, activities such as this can aid in the understanding that “I felt so much better when I punched him”, not because I improved the situation but because I released the anger, or “yeh! when I hit her I thought I was getting her back for cheating on me but I was only getting rid of the knot in my stomach”.

“But I lose it before I have time to think. I’m shaking with anger and I lash out then regret it later”

There is often a general consensus of anger being like a spontaneous combustion. No build up. This is where an approach such as rational emotive therapy can assist. I often ask students

to think of a situation where their thoughts have automatically turned to blame, “yeh but she made me do it”, or “HEY! if I lose - he wins”, or “this is unfair”, or “poor me”. I then ask them to think about the feeling in their gut. Often there is extreme discomfort and the head is starting to pound. The reaction is automatic. The person’s thoughts have backed them into a corner and tension can rapidly mount. The word “STOP” can be effective here. This is a good place to pop the question “is the event (situation) causing your distress or are your thoughts compounding (increasing) it.

Drawing diagrams and pictures of actual stories and alternate thought patterns on a white board can aid discussion here, and assist students to recognise the early onset of anger.

Simulations where students demonstrate initial experiences then repeat the scenario changing both the thoughts and behaviour can also highlight areas of choice.

During these activity it is vital to acknowledge that some experiences do hurt, “OUCH!”, and we are going to feel pain and anger. However, our pain and anger doesn’t need to destroy our lives or damage others. If we handle it gently we become stronger. A technique such as narrative therapy which highlights the strengths in individual stories can be used to change the emphasis away from “but Miss, you’ve gotta kill them, you’ve gotta teach them a lesson if they call your sister a slut” to “you’re very loyal to your family and you feel the urge to protect them. Can you think of any other ways you could handle a situation like that”. “Well! I suppose I could ...”

The accounts of effective experiential anger management during class time are contained in moments such as these where the student becomes involved in a forward moving process. A short-term remand course is really about the seed which contains the change. A few thought

provoking hints on how to water this seed, and just maybe the response will be “WOW! I actually decided to practice that time out thing and I can’t believe it. This time it worked”.