

*Transformational Nature of Anger: Clinical Applications for the
Treatment of Adult Clients
TLPCA Counseling and Therapy Summit*

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An illustration of a tree with a thick trunk and a large, rounded, light green canopy. The tree is positioned on the left side of the frame. Behind the tree and extending across the width of the image is a long, multi-tiered bridge or aqueduct with many small, repeating arches. The bridge is drawn in a simple, line-art style. The background is a light blue sky and a light green ground. The company name 'VEDUTA CONSULTING' is written in a large, bold, serif font at the bottom of the image.

VEDUTA CONSULTING

Brief notes about me.....

- Retired professor counseling
- Practice owner and therapist
- Researcher
- Tennessee transplant



Objectives

- Learn about the emotion of anger and its relationship to aggression and hostility; traditional CBT treatment and anger's connection to addiction.
- Learn about anger as messenger about change.
- Learn about the characteristics of transformational anger and how to use it in treatment.



Introduction to Anger

Historically, anger has been considered one of the triad of negative emotions. Along with depression and anxiety, it is often thought of as problematic, causing us to communicate in ways we regret later, like crying, screaming or snapping at others, or leading to direct or indirect violent behaviors. Many of us view our own anger as well as the anger of our clients, as a component of the more “difficult” aspects of the self.



Introduction to Anger

Anger – an emotion (an aversive physiological state) that ranges from annoyance to rage. Anger is often at the heart of other emotions such as resentment and contempt.

Aggression – refers to the behavioral component of anger's mismanagement. Aggressive behaviors including: physical attacks, verbally abusive behavior, and passive-aggressive behaviors (e.g. dawdling, forgetting).

Anger-----Aggression



Introduction to Anger

Hostility – refers to a cognitive component that is sometimes present with anger control difficulties and is often associated with personality disordered characteristics. Hostility refers to a cognitive set characterized by perceiving others as harboring ill will and as deserving of punishment or harm as a result. While hostility is rooted in cognitions, it is often characterized by a set of attitudes and behaviors including:

- Assault behaviors against others
- Indirect or roundabout aggression
- Irritability
- Verbal negativism
- Resentment
- Suspicion

Hostility-----Anger-----Aggression



Introduction to Anger

Theory Exploration: Cognitive-Behavioral View of Anger

The cognitive-behavioral theory of anger suggests that anger is about the appraisal that one has been deprived of or denied what one is rightly due. This loss can be very focused and concrete (rage against the driver who took our parking space) or abstract and global (rage against the senselessness of a war). Anger is always about something. Directly connected to this appraisal is the behavioral consequences (often with an emphasis on the negative behavioral consequences – aggression). *

*Shields, S. A. (2002). *Speaking from the heart: Gender and the social meaning of emotion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.



Introduction to Anger

What makes anger special? Anger is deeply implicated in the exercise of power. Power is the ability to get what you want; anger is the means to exercise power when faced with the loss of or the threat of losing what you have. People feel anger when they believe they have experienced a violation of their rights. An important ingredient to this belief is the conviction that one is entitled to a particular state of affairs. Anger (and its emotion relatives such as resentment or jealousy) occurs when people believe that they have been or are threatened with being deprived of something they believe is rightfully theirs. Anger is an emotion of **violated entitlement** evoked any time one believes that a possession has unjustly been taken away or if there is the threat that it will be taken away. It is important to point out that just because someone believes her or himself to be entitled does not necessarily mean others agree.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

- First, we need to help clients know they are angry or regulate their anger.
- They confuse feelings of anger with other feelings like embarrassment, shame or sadness.
- Sex-role socialization and FOO issues mask their ability to recognize angry feelings.
- The role of “pet” emotions (the emotion that we feel all other emotions through) Sadness for women and Angry for men.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

Our angry feelings can be a signal that we need to change something. The positive, transformational aspect of anger is learning to the message in our anger.

Typically, that message can be about three things:

- ◆ Experiencing a unmet need.
- ◆ Experiencing a boundary violation.
- ◆ Experiencing an injustice.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

Anger can be seen as an emotional reaction to the absence of basic human needs and the presence of meaninglessness in an individual's life.

These unmet needs are often things the need for respect, significance, honor, expertise, love and a sense of belonging.

Treatment Idea: Connecting angry feelings to a hunch about unmet need. Connecting the effects of addiction/trauma unmet need.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

Anger can also be a signal about boundary violation. While the relationship between some types of boundary violation, like physical and/or sexual abuse and anger is more straightforward-when boundaries are violated in such a damaging way- client's anger is helping them to stand up for their own protection.

This perspective on anger is clearly connected to trauma.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

However, boundary violations can be felt whenever life asks too much or too little of us. When a client is overwhelming or when he/she is not challenged or feels bored, her/his anger is a way of signaling “enough—this needs to change!”

Anger in couples: Relational ethics drawn from Buber's concept of the I-Thou relationship, suggests that healthy relationships are characterized by emotional boundaries and the balanced exchange of giving and receiving. In healthy relationships, individuals balance their own emotional needs with the emotional needs of others, so that no one person in the relationship feels obligated to always give or can always demand to receive.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

Individuals who are out of balance often have feelings of entitlement that create emotional obligations in others. Relational obligations and demands are also connected to angry feelings. What does this mean?

Whether it is within the relationship itself or about a client's own individual life, her/his anger can be a signal that it is out of balance.

Anger is a messenger about “out of balance” effects caused by additions that can be expressed as entitlements.



Working with Anger from a Transformational Lens: Anger as a Messenger about Change

Finally, angry feelings are directly connected to fairness and justice. When I am not treated well, my angry tells me to stand up for myself. This aspect of anger is the most connected to the thoughts of destructive entitlement, but it is also a source of courage and assertiveness. This aspect of anger is especially helpful when we need to have our individual voice heard or when we need to take action against a larger system that is having a negative effect on us.



Voices of the Transformed: The Study of Transformational Anger

“I could not be the person I am today, if I was not that angry person back then.”

You are an individual whose angry feelings have helped move you to higher levels of insight and development as a person....

In general, I am going to ask you about:

- ...your experiences with extreme anger-generating situations
- ...how you used your anger to transcend these experiences to grow and develop
- ...how you didn't let your experiences drive you into self-destruction, bitterness and violence...



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

People who use their anger to transform themselves are not dogmatic or stubborn, but remain flexible, even when they are really angry. They don't have a "just world" perspective and have a flexible worldview.

Treatment Idea: Reflecting angry feelings while confronting ridged thoughts.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Emotions are short-term, adaptive responses to immediate situations, sometimes not seen as the results of deliberation and reflection. Transformational anger is the result of deliberation and reflection. Transformational anger was associated with a longer-term issue or goal. It was connected reflections about underlying meaning and context.

Treatment Idea: Using an onion metaphor.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Some of people's "bedrock beliefs" are expectations about when, where, and how emotions should occur and what their occurrence signifies.

Treatment Idea: Gentle confrontation to encourage more positive, adaptive and healthy "bedrock beliefs" about anger.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

A schema is “ abstract expectations about how the world generally operates, built from past experience with specific examples.” Schemas help guide people to information that appears to have relevance to prior knowledge. Our schemas tend to direct us to pay attention to what we already know and help us deal with uncertain or ambiguous situations.

Treatment Idea: Using schemas and bedrocks beliefs to reinforce recovery and reframe angry feelings.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Voice and Visibility

Anger that is transformational helped clients be heard by others and not become invisible. Clients are angry because of the specific way in which they were treated by others, but this lead, over time, to becoming more critical of socially and politically oppressive acts. They had voice and were not invisible, even when family, friends, and power “others” clearly treated them as unimportant. This remains true even when their behaviors were sometimes socially “inappropriate” or aggressive.

Treatment Idea: Movement from excuse to analysis.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Resistance to Labels

Transformational anger leads to increase level of self-awareness and self-knowledge. Movement away from self-limiting labels.

Anger Communities

Transformational anger helps clients move away from isolation. Raises the importance of being connected to others who are experiencing the same level of angry about the same things they are angry about.

Treatment Idea: Seeing a recovery community and trauma support group as an anger community.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

The Edge

Angry people are often not “nice” people. They have an “edge” to them. They can be very assertive, almost aggressive and others may see them as stubborn and opinionated. Many seem filled with strong emotions, including a sense of loneliness and a defensiveness, as if they know others judged them and are always defending against these judgments.



Voices of the Transformed: Themes

Connected to Others

Anger is often defined as an emotional experience that separates the self from another. When someone is angry, they are isolated and disconnected. Transformational anger seems to be about connected anger. The participants experienced their anger as a way of bringing people together. Transformational anger creates healthy boundaries between people. It allows for self-expression and self-determination, but also allows for empathy and connection.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Personal Uniqueness vs Entitlement

Transformational anger allows for a belief in personal uniqueness, pushing back on negative beliefs or labels. There is a difference between being emotional and having strong feelings of anger, (“I will not be squashed”) versus the sense of entitlement that is sometimes associated with traditional concepts of anger. “The world owes me something.”



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Bridge between Authenticity and Empathy

Transformational anger is a bridge between authenticity and empathy. Authenticity is being “emotionally real,” connected, vital and clearly purposeful in relationships. It is about “telling it like it is,” which can include the expression of thoughts and feelings that might hurt another. Empathy is feeling connected and affectively joined with others, while at the same time appreciating one’s separateness. Being empathic might mean holding back on your thoughts and feelings to “save or protect” the feelings of another. Anger can be seen as a bridge between these two aspects of relationships. Being in touch with anger allow feelings of authenticity, which can allow the holding back on its expression if necessary.



Voices of the Transformed: Themes

Role Flexibility and Gender Expectations

Emotions helped to establish gender boundaries. Those who experienced transformational anger used their anger expression to broaden and make more flexible expectations of others based on gender roles. For example, some women said that “being seen as an angry woman” allowed them more agency in their female gender identity. It allows them to take more direct action to cause change in their lives but still be seen as feminine.

Treatment Idea: This is especially helpful in trauma.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Anger Without Shame

Encouraging clients to feel anger, without shame about their anger. This can be seen as movement away from early life shame. This shame was often connected to either abuse experiences or believing labels that were placed on them.

A Sense of Empowerment

Transformational anger is anger used to help people heard by others, to create a presence and a sense of personal power. Individuals who used their anger in a transformational manner are aware that others benefit from the suppression of anger in another person.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Seeing Others For What They Really Are

Transformational anger can be used as a protection from stereotypical images of how someone “should be.” Sometimes anger can help you see the world more clearly, and this leads to a sense of clarity. Anger can be a block from sociopolitical images enforced by cultural norms.

Treatment Idea: Negative anger seems to be experienced when someone violates a relational image and the client is passive, in direct contrast to the clarity of transformational anger as a call to action.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Reflected “Unworked” Issues

Those who experienced transformational anger are confronted with relationships that evoked anger in them, but they seemed aware that sometimes anger is a reflection of something in him or her rather than about the relationship.

Treatment Idea: Perhaps most importantly, an angry person is a self-reflective person.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

Someone is Not Trustworthy

Transformational anger can indicate that someone is not trustworthy.

Recognize Imbalanced Relationships

Transformational anger can help clients recognize imbalances and demand others to be accountable.

Treatment Idea: Anger used to evaluate relationships.



Transformational Anger: Characteristics and Treatment Ideas

What Does Transformational Anger Help People Do?

- **Facilitates identity development.**
- **Develops a differentiated/individuated sense of self.**
- **Creates empathic connections.**
- **Increases social justice awareness.**
- **Empowers insights towards action and change.**
- **Separates anger from shame.**



Thank you for your time and attention!

Questions and reactions

