



## Anger Management

When applied to intimate partner violence, anger management has been controversial and sometimes misunderstood. When applied generally, the goal of anger management is to reduce overly strong anger, which may be related to a very uncomfortable or frightening sense of loss of control; health problems such as high blood pressure; and some forms of aggression. It can also help reduce anger related to passive-aggressive behavior. Anger management programs teach constructive emotional expression and point out that anger is not the problem—it is a normal feeling. Anger becomes a problem when it is expressed inappropriately through aggression or becomes a state of chronic hostility. *Aggression* is usually defined as behavior that interferes with the rights of others, and it can include emotional, symbolic, and physical abuse. Aggression is distinguished from *assertiveness*, which is the constructive expression of feelings and personal rights. Methods of anger management usually include the following: (a) relaxation to reduce physiological arousal related to anger; (b) problem solving to find rational alternatives to aggression; (c) cognitive restructuring to uncover the thoughts that lead to anger and to create constructive thoughts that reduce anger; (d) recognition of physiological cues that are early warning signs of extreme anger; and (e) time-out to remove oneself from a situation in which one's anger is escalating. Anger can also sometimes be reduced when it is recognized that hurt or fear underlie it and are being masked by anger.

Anger management has been used to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of family violence, including child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence, often under the heading of “cognitive therapy” or “stress management.” There are several reasons why it is controversial when applied to domestic violence. Edward Gondolf and David Russell were probably the first of many authors to critique anger management for men who batter. They state that it

- “fails to account for the premeditated controlling behaviors associated with abuse,”
- “tends to diffuse the responsibility of the abuse and prolong the batterer's denial,”
- “is often misrepresented as a quick-fix that may endanger battered women,”
- “does not sufficiently address the normative reinforcements for wife abuse and violence toward women in general.”

There have been proposals to prohibit the use of anger management through state legislation, and some state standards for abuser programs claim that anger management does not hold abusers accountable for their behavior.

Tolman and **Saunders** contend that anger management can be used effectively to end domestic violence if applied carefully and within a program that includes anti-sexist gender resocialization. Many programs are able to combine feminist and cognitive-behavioral (anger management) approaches through theory integration, for example, by seeing patriarchy as a necessary but not sufficient cause of domestic violence. For some abusers, environmental stressors and anger may be the ingredients that go beyond sexist beliefs in leading to violence. Such programs are eclectic and combine feminist models that confront male dominance, teach the benefits of gender equality for all, and expand men's gender roles, as well as teach anger management. In addition, programs increasingly recognize different types of men who batter, with an "emotionally volatile" type having impulse control problems that may not respond well to interventions that emphasize the "costs" of aggressive behavior, like arrest and divorce. These programs emphasize that they are starting with the feeling state of men who batter, helping them to accept full responsibility for generating anger-producing thoughts.

—Daniel G. Saunders

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## Further Readings

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## Entry Citation:

Saunders, Daniel G. "Anger Management." *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008. 26-27.

