



# Anger awareness



***Ged King** shares with us the rationale behind a long-running anger awareness course in Liverpool, and her practical tips for good outcomes*

*'Putting angry young people together in a room for two or three days? You must get paid danger money!'*

I have often heard this comment after describing my role as a facilitator of anger groups in Liverpool's Young Person's Advisory Service (YPAS). But in this article I hope to convey the positive impact groupwork can have on young people with anger issues. As YPAS is based in the centre of this wonderful but sometimes problematic city, there is no shortage of angry young people to fill our groups.

We work in a large Victorian building that has been used by charities for more than 90 years, where we provide an integrated support and counselling service to young people in a person-centred environment. Anger groups have been run in my organisation for about 10 years, and I took over facilitating them in 2006. At the time, I was a newly qualified counsellor, full of enthusiasm, but also full of trepidation about what the job would be like. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to inherit not only the groupwork but also two experienced co-facilitators and a group supervisor as colleagues. They all helped me to develop the skills I needed, and encouraged my deep passion and commitment to using groupwork therapeutically with young people.

*'The group has made me realise that I am not the only young person with anger difficulties and it is not a wrong feeling but an emotion that can cause problems.'*

Looking back on the group evaluations and comments that we have collected from young people over the years, I was struck by the insight in the above young person's comment and how it sums up the ethos of the groups that we, as facilitators, are trying to create. Anger is often seen as a problematic behaviour in children and young people, mainly because it is frequently combined with aggressive and damaging actions. This has created an emphasis on using 'anger management' techniques with them. But as therapists trained in the person-centred way, we have a different emphasis for our groups. We renamed our group 'anger awareness' because, as our young person so succinctly put it, we wanted to place the emphasis on raising the young people's awareness of their anger as a *valid emotion that was causing them difficulties*. By providing them with the space to reflect on the behaviours this triggered, we could help them change their actions and understand the emotion.

The title of the group is not the only change in the past 10 years. The facilitator's gender and background, the age groups of the young people, and even the quality of the snacks we provide have also changed. (Previously we took young people to a local restaurant for lunch – lovely for the young people, but stressful for the facilitators; now we provide lunch in-house.) Most of these changes have been for

pragmatic reasons – funding, and staff availability – but there are some features of the group that have been consistent for 10 years. For instance, the group format has remained the same: we run it as a two-day workshop, and young people attend from 9.30am to 3.30pm each day. There are practical reasons for this: schools are more inclined to let young people attend if this is the set-up, but also, in therapeutic terms, the consecutive days produce a more intense form of bonding – it never ceases to amaze me how the initial awkwardness of the group is replaced by a strong closeness that enables them to share and learn from each other in an open and non-judgmental way.

The referral process into the groups has changed a little. Although YPAS has an open referral process, the young people invited to attend the group are also taken from our generic counselling referrals, from among those who have identified anger as a presenting issue. As part of this process, a consistent feature of the group has been the one-to-one informal assessment that takes place with each member before the group starts. This allows the facilitators to evaluate each young person's suitability for groupwork and what their anger needs are, gives the young person a flavour of the course, and enables the young person to make a voluntary choice to be involved with the group – young people with anger issues are not often presented with choices about how to deal with their anger!

Along with many other voluntary organisations in today's challenging economic climate, YPAS has embraced the use of outcome measures as an integral part of our practice. Consequently, the anger awareness project uses both formal and informal measures to monitor the progress of the group. As part of the one-to-one session, we use the formal measurement tools of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Goal Based Outcomes (GBO), which help us to assess the needs of group members. Throughout the workshop we use evaluation sheets to monitor the preferences of each group, so we can tailor an organic programme to reflect the needs of each group and its individual members. At the end of the workshop, we review each young person's measures with them individually and they complete a CHI-Experience of Service Questionnaire (CHI-ESQ), to help us monitor and improve our service. The SDQ and GBO forms and the CHI-ESQ answers have given us statistically significant evidence that our anger groups are both valued by the young people and provide them with an enhanced understanding of their anger issues.

### *So how do we run anger awareness groups at YPAS?*

One of the initial tasks we ask of group members, and an essential one for the safety and development of the group as a force for change, is the establishment of

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ground rules. The group members themselves set the rules, so that they take ownership of them rather than having them imposed. This keeps group boundaries, helps the young people to feel safe, and allows us as facilitators to encourage and nurture rather than act as law keepers.

*'Helped me learn new stuff; learn about other people, fun way to learn.'*

This is a comment made by one of our group members, and sums up how the young people feel about the group. Although the sessions are partly focused on providing them with more appropriate coping skills for dealing with difficult situations and relationships, we try to do this in an open and organic way. We have learnt over the years to reduce the amount of writing and paperwork we use in the groups. Often these can link to young people's frustrations with their own abilities and, not surprisingly, can make them upset and uncomfortable – and they get angry.

As a result of feedback from our young people, we tend to use activities that include moving around the room, working together and promoting discussion, and we offer small prizes (chocolate bars and lollipops are always greatly appreciated). We use a resource called Anger Mapping, which involves the group placing themselves on an Anger Chart on the floor. The chart maps anger on a spectrum from 'not angry at all' to 'a little angry', 'fairly angry' and 'very angry'. This allows them to measure their anger response to

real-life scenarios that they may encounter at home, in school or in social situations. The exercise raises energy levels – we often do it after lunch – but also promotes discussion about individual responses to anger while avoiding feelings of judgment and discomfort. It also facilitates ideas for new coping strategies for dealing with challenging everyday situations, both from us and from each other. Another group exercise is a discussion called Gains and Losses of Aggression, which encourages an exploration of how aggressive behaviour can provide a means of obtaining some advantages in life but may also have huge emotional and life-changing physical costs. As one group member, who had recently been released from prison for assault, said:

*'The workshop has broadened my outlook on life; I can't go around hurting people and being abusive.'*

There is a strong element of psychoeducation in the anger awareness groups at YPAS. We understand that young people do need coping strategies and techniques for dealing with their anger and the difficulties in which it can place them. However, the exercise that invariably gets the most positive feedback in the evaluations is Lifeline. It is this exercise that facilitates the close bonding of the group, allowing them to learn from each other's vulnerabilities and strengths in the therapeutic space co-created by us. Lifeline is a simple exercise. We ask the members of the group to think of five challenging and five positive experiences they have lived through

and to share them with the rest of the group. Inevitably, many of the young people have experienced difficult and complex life situations; sharing these with other group members, and so bringing them into their awareness, allows them to recognise the links between these difficulties and their anger:

*'I think Lifeline was most helpful, as it helped me realise why and when my anger became a problem.'*

By keeping the groups relatively small – our maximum number is 10, but most of our groups involve six to eight members – we are able to provide the safe, nurturing environment that the Lifeline exercise needs. Here, they can share their stories and be heard by others in a non-judgmental, empathic way. The ability of young people to empathise and support each other constantly impresses me, and is at the core of our belief in the power of the group as a therapeutic tool. There are many evaluations from group members that reinforce this view, but this one sums it up for me:

*'Everyone sharing their experiences – as it made me feel like people could relate to me and that I was not alone.'*

Another consistent feature of the anger awareness group has been the inclusion of creative arts in the programme. In the past, we invited the young people to create an Anger Image, and provided them with a blank canvas, lots of paint and other creative materials, a big mat on the floor – and time. But there was a gradual awareness that many young people found it very challenging to be presented with a blank canvas, so we changed the creative aspect into mask making. We buy plastic masks from a local art shop and provide paint, feathers and lots of art materials. Anger is often seen as a mask for other more difficult emotions, and the young people seem to find the mask much less threatening. Our only complaint has been from young men having to leave the building with shiny glitter all over their black tracksuits.

To summarise, here are my top five tips for running an effective anger awareness group.

- Give importance to the assessment process – it is key, both for facilitators and for individual group members.
- Enable each group member to tell their story and to feel listened to and heard by both the facilitators and the other young people.
- Organise the group as an organic, creative space that responds to the individual needs of each group in turn, rather than as a rigid programme to impose on them.
- Provide a comfortable environment and plenty of quality snacks. Never underestimate how important it is for young people to feel nurtured and valued.
- Give importance to group supervision, which not only facilitates the personal and professional development of the leaders but also provides a reflective space in which to develop and nurture the groupwork.

I hope this article will encourage other therapists to consider 'putting some angry young people in a room together'. I am happy to be contacted for a chat about this kind of work.

My thanks and gratitude have to go to my ex tutor and long-term group supervisor for the anger awareness project at YPAS, Caro Marsh, who has encouraged as well as enabled me to put my thoughts and feelings about the group into a coherent and readable form.

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