

# ANGER MANAGEMENT

## Working with violent offenders

**We sit facing each other in the dingy cell I call my office. We share the environment, inhabit different worlds. The men come in all shapes and sizes: small and self-effacing, smiling and articulate, argumentative or quietly threatening. You wouldn't give most of them a second glance in the street but they have all killed or tried to kill. They are being interviewed for the Anger Management Group.**

This one, in his early forties, has the physique, the fearful yet defiant air, of a deprived child. He is staring at the alarm bell which appears to be strategically placed for his convenience, not mine. I ask him to show me his work. The pieces are ill-written, poorly constructed, the images terrifying. He fixes me with a look both intense and empty, and starts to talk.

Every probation officer will have heard it all before. The unhappy childhood, rejection, local authority care, delinquency, unemployment, violence, prison...

I stop listening, look at the hands. HATE, DEATH, the nails bitten down to the quick, a forefinger jabbing the air for emphasis. His shoulders are high with tension as he expounds his belief that *he* is the victim.

I remind myself, and him, that he has attempted to kill 3 women. He has an explanation for this. It is all a plot by the Freemasons. Furthermore, one of the women stabbed herself with a pair of 'meat scissors' he kept for hobby purposes. No, he has no problem with women. He loves them; and anyway what happened is in the past. He wants to discuss the future. We agree the Anger Management Group is not for him.

The next is immediately recognisable. I have run many groups for his kind over the years. He is heavily built, head shaved to a dark stubble, gold ear-ring. The ubiquitous tattoos extend from hands to neck. He has always had problems with authority. His first attack was upon a teacher at school. He is in prison for the attempted murder of a policeman.

A single, very deep, line appears on his forehead when he is upset. He is upset now. He has not heard from anyone for a week. 'They' are stealing his letters. He will have to stab a 'screw' or take a hostage, make them take notice. He is a 22 year old who still believes that if he screams, kicks and lashes out he can impose his will upon the world.

We talk about his mother who is still lying to him, placating him, letting him down - "no, son, I never got the visiting order you sent" - about the stepfather who hated him, about the anger aimed at all those people who tell him what to do.

We talk about the group and his part in it. He will be expected to attend every session, refrain from physical or verbal abuse, preserve confidentiality, participate fully and honestly. I add his name to the list.

The Anger Management Group is based upon behaviour modification principals and the purpose of the interviews is to eliminate those unable or unwilling to benefit. Excluded are the mentally-ill, those whose aggression is a response to lack of inter-personal skills and those who are violent without apparent emotion. For these, the aggression responses may have a functional component making them unlikely to be touched by a group of this kind.

We are looking for motivation and a commitment to change. The group's target is those whose anger is perceived by them as leading to violence. Should the violence be drink or drug related a conscious choice has still been made to take mood-enhancing substances, knowing that loss of self-control will result.

The group will emphasise the need to accept responsibility for one's actions, to change one's behaviour, to be aware of the victim and to achieve self-respect through self-control.

Violence is common-place in our society. We seem increasingly tolerant to the depiction of extreme violence on film, television and video. However, few will admit to or condone the use of personal violence. Even the sadistic paedophile understands that his behaviour is unacceptable. The attitudes of most offenders to those who have used violence towards children or the old range from contempt to murderous hatred.

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**"It was out of character." "I hate violence but I'd been drinking." "It's not my fault. I take after my old man".**

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This abhorrence is reflected in the statements violent offenders make about themselves. "It was out of character." "I hate violence but I'd been drinking." "It's not my fault. I take after my old man".

This ambivalence is the starting point for change. The first task is accepting that violence doesn't 'just happen' but is

a process. That anger and resentment are already present awaiting the spark to set the fuse alight. That changes must take place in body and brain to enable the emotion (anger) to most efficiently fuel the physical expression (violence). That the anger level must then be artificially kept up by the use of trigger words or self-statements ("Who does he think he is?" "She's trying to make a fool of me".)

The individual must learn to recognise potentially dangerous situations, be aware of physical changes and tensions, discover his personal trigger words and replace them with positive self-statements.

The sessions last for 8 weeks and include the use of body language in defusing hostile situations, creating self-awareness, role play, keeping an anger control diary, techniques for problem solving, relaxation and building self-esteem.

Evaluation at the end is followed 3 months later by assessment for changes in behaviour/attitudes.

Many violent offenders lack self-worth, are fearful and emotionally fragile. Work in prison can be effective because it is possible to examine hostility and aggression away from the pressures of family life and personal relationships. The prison environment can be a practice ground for trying out the techniques for coping.

When Anger Management is seen as an integral part of sentence planning for violent offenders it will not only enhance the concept of rehabilitation but arguably prevent victims in the future.

*Mary Anker is a Probation Officer at HM Prison Albany*

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## CONFRONTING VIOLENCE

### A view from inside.

To attempt to confront angry and violent responses without the assistance of others would, I feel, be impossible...

In such an environment as Grendon, where assistance has been available at every turn, I have been able to confront the situations that bring about emotional turmoil which has, in the past, been readily expressed in an angry way.

Having to stop and analyse what the real feelings are that I could not acknowledge was difficult. Feelings such as being threatened, belittled, ignored, dismissed and uncared for have their origins going back many years...

The violence in my life has been a result of low self respect and lack of self awareness; abilities and attributes I should have developed from an early age and matured with; this never happened...

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