

Anger at work

In the second of a series of articles looking at emotions that are likely to be addressed in coaching, **Gladeana McMahon** focuses on anger

According to an article in the *Sunday Times Magazine* in July 2006, 45 per cent of us regularly lose our temper at work and 64 per cent of Britons working in an office have experienced office rage. Fifty per cent of us have reacted to computer problems by hitting our PC, hurling parts of it around, screaming or abusing our colleagues and 65 per cent of people express anger over the phone, 26 per cent in writing and 9 per cent face to face.

You can be forgiven for thinking that we live in a world of aggressive and unpleasant individuals. Employers would like to think that people leave their emotions outside the workplace but this will actually never happen.

The upside of anger is that it gets things done. Work practices have come into being because individuals felt frustrated or angry at inefficiency or unfairness. In this sense anger is an appropriate emotion and one from which individuals and organisations can benefit.

However, excessive anger is damaging. It can damage lung function (Jackson, Kubzansky, Cohen, Sheldon, Jacobs, David, Wright 2007), cause increased blood pressure and hypertension (Suls, Wan, Costa 1995) and is linked to coronary heart disease (Shekelle, Gale, Ostfield, Paul 1983). Relationships can be damaged as people find working with or for an irritable or angry person a challenge. Anger gets in the way of rational decision-making. The

individual's work prospects can be harmed as his employer questions his suitability to take on new challenges and, in severe cases, the organisation's duty of care to its other employees may take priority over the individual (Hammer, Poole 2008).

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Many people deal effectively with angry feelings while others cannot and there are a number of factors that contribute to this.

There is some evidence to suggest a genetic component. For example, mothers who produce stress hormones while pregnant can pass these on to their unborn child, which, in turn, makes the child less able to withstand stress (Glover, O'Connor 2002). People who are stressed often experience increased irritability and outbursts of anger. Therefore, in this sense, you could say that some individuals have a predisposition towards anger or perhaps have less natural protection against it.

But there are a number of additional factors such as family history, stressful life events, thinking style, learned behaviour, poor coping skills, individual personality and lack of social support (Davies 2000). Even if geneticists discover other biological factors that predispose an individual towards anger, a predisposition is not a life sentence. An individual could be predisposed towards a condition like diabetes, for example, but if he eats well, exercises and has a healthy lifestyle, he may never go on to develop the disease.

Therefore, a predisposition towards an irritable or angry way of being does not necessarily mean being a victim of this.

Any event in which we feel threatened can generate feelings of anger as much as anxiety. Psychologists have discovered that even pleasant experiences such as gaining a promotion can be stressful as they also contain change – too much change, even positive change, requires a degree of emotional re-adjustment (Holmes, Rahe 1967).

Research demonstrates that people who think in certain ways are more likely to feel angry. Such thinking styles include discounting the positive (always putting down or dismissing anything positive that is said), maximising negative events (by being overly pessimistic and dramatic) or having a perfectionist attitude towards oneself and/or others. In particular, individual beliefs regarding the concepts of justice and fairness are likely to trigger angry feelings.



There is a strong link between thoughts and mood (Wills, Sanders 1997): the more negative the thinking, the more anger a person is likely to feel, particularly when the thoughts are based on perceptions of threat or injustice (McMahon 2008).

For example, Michael, John and Peter were all being considered for promotion to managing director at the same investment bank. Michael approached the lead-up to the selection with a natural sense of concern. Peter felt he had done all he could and would either get the job or not and that, if not, he would probably get it the next time round. However, John was tense and irritable. He felt he had always given his all at work and that this should be rewarded. He was known as a bit of a perfectionist, who did not 'suffer fools gladly', and was becoming increasingly sharp with those around him as he feared that any error at this stage could make the difference between gaining and losing his promotion.

Peter was promoted and, while Michael was disappointed, he soon settled back into his normal routine. But John became very angry and felt he had been treated unfairly. His irritability became full-blown anger at what he believed was the injustice of the situation and those who worked with him found him difficult to manage and report to. It was at this stage that his organisation employed the services of an executive coach to help him manage his anger.

Basic personality is likely to either help or hinder dealing with anger. The Classic Type A and Type B personalities come into play here (Friedman 1996). Type As are ambitious, competitive, hard driving and more likely to ignore stress symptoms. They have tremendous capacity when it comes to energy and drive and are often highly productive. However, they tend to go down rather spectacularly when they become seriously overloaded.

Type Bs are more laid back, find it easier to keep matters in perspective and are more likely to ask for help at an earlier stage.

One of the classic symptoms of a stressed Type A is irritability and anger, and even the most charismatic and normally-stable personalities can be prone to angry outbursts over the smallest of issues when they are stressed.

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If an individual is unlucky enough to find it hard to control anger or if, as a manager, colleague or direct report, you have to deal with such individuals, you will want to know if it's possible to change.

The best approach to dealing with anger is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). The National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the NHS have both recommended CBT as the treatment of choice when working with conditions such as anger. One study on the effectiveness of CBT and anger, undertaken by Richard Beck and Ephrem Fernandez (2001), found that the average CBT recipient was better off than 76 per cent of untreated subjects in terms of anger reduction. In a number of additional studies CBT was also shown to have a marked effect in reducing anger and its consequent problems.

In more recent years, many of the skills associated with CBT have been brought into the realm of coaching under what is called cognitive behavioural coaching or CBC (McMahon 2007).

CBC works in a holistic manner yet is based on sound psychological principles; it works by examining situations, thoughts, emotions,

behaviours and the effect that these have on individual physiology. By considering what an individual thinks about him or herself, the world and other people in general, and exploring how thoughts and feelings fuel anger, what triggers individual angry responses and what strategies are needed to deal with these, the individual is enabled to think, feel and act in a healthier and more appropriate manner.

Some of the strategies are as simple as learning to breathe properly, distracting oneself from a negative train of thought and counting to ten, while others are far more complex and explore individual belief systems to unearth the root cause of the individual's self-defeating thinking and its impact on behaviour.

The four areas that a CBC programme covers are physical impact, thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Physical impact

Part of an effective anger management coaching programme focuses on understanding the impact that anger has on the body. The individual is introduced to the biological concept and implications of the 'stress response' and how producing stress hormones can damage the body, including the immune system (Palmer, Cooper 2007). He is also taught to identify what are seen as the physical 'early warning signs' of anger. Many people say that they have no control over their anger as it comes 'out of the blue' but, upon further exploration, it becomes evident that they experience a set of physical sensations during the early onset of anger. When helped to recognise these,

Figure 1

Breathing exercise

1. Take a deep breath in slowly through your nose
2. Then let it out slowly through your mouth
3. As you do so, consciously relax your tummy muscles and let your shoulders drop
4. Do this three or four times.



they can take action to stop such sensations escalating.

This stage also considers the impact of diet, exercise and relaxation. The difficulty with many relaxation techniques is that they require the individual to stop doing something to concentrate on the relaxation exercise itself. These exercises can be successfully used as homework assignments but people also need something that can be used discretely within the workplace itself.

A simple breathing exercise as in Figure 1 (on p63) provides a practical strategy to stop anger escalating. The benefit of this particular type of breathing exercise is that it can be used anywhere and at any time, even in the car, as the individual is fully alert. Such an exercise can be used when talking to others, as it is imperceptible. The client is encouraged to undertake this exercise as many times as possible throughout the day, until it becomes second nature. Once this is achieved, it can be easily used in stressful situations.

Thoughts

The individual is introduced to the concept of core beliefs, life rules and negative automatic thoughts. Core beliefs are formed about ourselves, others and the world in general from the messages we receive in early life; they are rather like an engine room as they provide the energy that fuels thoughts, feelings and actions.

Life rules relate to the strategies we employ to enact our core beliefs in normal day-to-day life. Negative automatic thoughts are triggered in response to the situations we face.

For example, a core belief of 'People must treat me fairly' will lead to a life rule of 'If I don't stand up for myself, people will think I am weak', which, in turn, manifests itself, when the individual does not get the expected bonus or promotion, in negative thoughts such as 'How dare they

Anger Diary			
Date	Time	Situation (Trigger)	What you did
10.04.08	10.30am	Boss asked me to rewrite a section in a report I had submitted.	Took the report back to my desk and threw it down. Was very angry as there was nothing wrong with what I had done.
10.04.08	12 noon	Colleague interrupted me while I was working	Raised my voice and told my colleague to come back later. Turned away and went back to work.

Figure 2

treat me like this, they have no respect for me!

One tool likely to be used at this stage is an anger diary (see the opposite page). This is a useful way of keeping track of what is happening, what triggers the client's anger and how he reacts (Padesky, Greenberger 1995). Once the client identifies the situations that he responds angrily to, he is half way to being able to do something about the unwanted behaviour.

The client is encouraged to write incidents down as contemporaneously as possible and read over what has been written in a bid to understand what caused the angry response and what alternative ways he could have reacted to it.

There are many strategies employed during this part of the process tailored to the needs of the individual. The skill of the coach is in aiding understanding about the relationship between thoughts and beliefs and in providing the counter-strategies that people can use to re-appraise their thinking.

Feelings

This part of the process focuses on the feelings the individual experiences and ways of dealing with these. Clients are asked to rate their feelings on a scale of zero to eight (zero = no response and eight = maximum response). In addition, they are asked to differentiate between irritability, frustration and anger as a way of understanding individual emotions and their causes.

Skills from emotional intelligence, positive psychology and mindfulness-based cognitive

coaching can all be used in addition to the CBC model.

Behaviours

The behavioural part of the programme focuses on the skills required to change the way the client behaves. Such skills may include those from assertiveness training because, for some clients, an angry response is triggered because they do not know how to deal with a situation. In such cases, anger is more of a defensive reaction to mask a sense of insecurity.

The coach may therefore find himself using the skills of anything from a Six Stage Problem Solving Model (McMahon, Leimon 2008) to thinking-it-over strategies.

As change does not happen overnight, the client may need to learn to count to ten before giving an answer or, if necessary, leave the situation. A simple strategy is to excuse oneself to go to the toilet and then take a few minutes to engage in deep breathing while working out how best to deal with the situation.

As the client becomes more proficient in dealing with events, his need to leave situations lessens. However, in the early part of the programme, it is better to leave a situation appropriately than to react inappropriately.

A typical CBC programme is likely to be between eight and 12 sessions of 90 minutes, spread over eight to 12 months.

Anger-related problems need no longer spoil people's lives and affect those around them

Providing an individual is prepared to engage in the process

and apply the strategies, anger can become a useful resource and not something to be feared. ■

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