



I need to run an anger management group

Most teenagers get angry. It's a natural emotion, something that we all experience. But, for some young people, their anger gets out of control and they find themselves in difficulties, especially at school. As a result, anger management groups have become more and more common in education as a way of helping students take control of their emotions and avoid getting into trouble. This guide is about how to set up and run an anger management group with students in a school. Although it's been written as if planning for a secondary school lesson, you can adapt the principles to apply for other age groups.

▣ Understanding anger

The starting point for working with young people in this area is to have a clear understanding about what is 'anger'. One advantage of this topic immediately springs to mind: unlike other issues like self harm or bereavement, we all experience anger. It's a universal human emotion. That means when it comes to leading a group, you'll be able to draw from your own personal experience. Be prepared to be honest with yourself and others about how **you** deal with anger.

Anger is described by most psychologists as a **secondary emotion**. That means that it is a direct result of another emotion. We might first feel afraid, attacked, offended, disrespected, forced, trapped, or pressured. If any of these feelings are intense enough, we think of the emotion as anger. Successful work with young people in anger management will involve helping them identify and deal with their **primary emotions** as well as with their anger.

Anger is a **powerful** and **primitive** emotion. In some ways, it could be thought of as a survival tool. Nature has developed the emotional state we call "anger" to help us stay alive. Anger sends signals to all parts of our body to help us fight or flee. It energizes us to prepare us for action. Many years ago we were threatened by wild animals who wanted to eat us! Now we more often feel threatened by other human beings, either psychologically or physically.

Anger affects us **physically** as well as emotionally. When we get angry a huge number of things change in our physical bodies: for example: adrenalin and other hormones are released, our body temperature may rise, our heart rate increases and our face becomes flushed, we may shake, sweat or even cry. Although these physical changes can take place in a matter of minutes, they often take several hours to dissipate and disappear.

Anger can be positive as well as negative. There are places and situations where anger is the correct response: however, there is a distinction between the feeling of anger and whether it is expressed appropriately. Learning to deal with conflict is a more positive way is an important step away from difficulties with anger. These are some of the issues that an anger management group will need to explore.

▶ Why people get angry

It's hard to categorise the reasons people, especially young people, will get angry. Sometimes the causes are obvious, at other times inexplicable. However, there are some broad themes that can help in understanding what might be the reason.

habit: where young people have fallen into a pattern of behaviour that includes getting angry.

attention: where young people are seeking attention from others through anger.

boredom: where young people find the excitement and adrenalin rush of anger alleviates boredom.

low self esteem: where young people use anger as a defense mechanism when they feel undermined.

criticism: where young people have a highly sensitive response to criticism.

protection: where young people are acting to protect a person or possession or perceived territory.

example: where young people have grown up seeing anger used as a common way of dealing with conflict.

justice: where young people feel a strong sense of injustice for themselves or others.

▶ Working in groups

It's important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of using small groups as a way of working with young people. Much of the pastoral work in schools today is done one-to-one: group work is less common. However, there's a strong argument for taking the group work approach, especially when dealing with subjects like anger and conflict.

➤ Young people can have as much to learn from their peers as from a curriculum or group leader. Hearing the experiences and stories of others can be encouraging ("I'm not alone") and open up new possibilities ("Perhaps I could try that solution").

➤ There is also the potential of students providing support for each other once the group has ended, especially if the young people in the group have had a positive experience of being together and got to know and trust each other. Having someone who has been through the same programme can be a real asset back in the everyday reality of the classroom.

➤ Working in a group makes exercises and tasks much easier to run. Take, for example, an exercise in the form of a game where students have to look at cards containing different situations and place them on a board with spaces for different 'reactions' on. In a one-to-one session this would be hard to play with just one student, but with a group of four or five the dynamic and experience changes, becoming much more interactive and allowing students to listen to the answers of others as well as thinking about what they would do. The contrast in views has the potential to create a much broader discussion than you might expect from talking to a single student. It's also less intense, giving students moments in the 'spotlight' and other moments where they can step back and listen to others.

➤ Group work also allows many more young people to benefit from a programme. In an hour, five or more young people can participate, compared to just a single student in a one-to-one session. With a subject as universally applicable as anger management, demand is often high. Group work enables at least some of that demand to be met.

However, it's also worth noting there are challenges in working with groups:

❖ Group dynamics are important and the students participating will need to be selected carefully in order to avoid any potential pitfalls. For example, two students who do not get on or trust each other, or students who bully or harass other students, may have a negative impact on how the group functions. Age may also be relevant: putting a Year 7 student in a group with Year 9 and 10 students may also create difficulties. Where the group dynamics are wrong, the chances of running a successful programme are much smaller.

❖ A group may give rise to behaviour issues among group members who are more likely to be disruptive in this context than if on their own.

❖ It may be hard to locate a suitable room for group work in a school. Most schools were not designed and built with pastoral work in mind and finding an appropriate space can be difficult for seven or eight people to work together without disturbance. Of course, one-to-one work also faces the same issue, although sometimes offices and smaller rooms can be used.

👉 **Key issues to address in anger management**

Anger management programmes are increasingly common both in schools and elsewhere. In this section, we'll think about some of the key areas that need to be covered and a few of the basic exercises and approaches available.

❖ **Triggers**

For many young people, there are certain situations or events that cause them to get angry. Identifying these and helping the young person understand why they 'trigger' an angry response is an important stage in helping manage anger. For example, a young person may be especially sensitive about their family or their parents, perhaps for a specific reason like a family breakdown. As a result, if anyone insults or even comments on their family, this may be a trigger for the young person to become angry. Another example might be being told off by someone, like a teacher. The point of identifying these triggers is to help the young person either to steer clear of these situations altogether or be prepared with some 'cooling down' strategies if they cannot be avoided.

Common triggers among young people include:

- aggression from someone else
- feeling physically trapped
- feeling vulnerable
- being teased or bullied

A practical exercise to help identify triggers could include role play or a sorting task where young people have to put in order a list of possible triggers beginning with the most relevant to them.

❖ **Physical impact of anger**

Most young people can identify anger as an emotion, but few of them recognise the huge physical effects of anger on their bodies. Getting angry has a strong physiological dimension. One of the most important lessons for a young person is recognising how long many of these effects take to subside. That means that although getting angry may have only taken a few moments, it may be many hours before the body returns to its normal state. In this period of time, the young person may be more likely to get angry again.

Physiological changes include:

- increased body temperature
- sweating

- shaking
- draining off blood from the face (going 'white')
- reddening of the face (going 'red')
- release of 'flight or fight' hormones like adrenalin

It's useful to work with young people to identify what kinds of physical impact anger has on them. This work can be linked with looking at 'cooling down' techniques (see below) which can help alleviate some of these changes.

A practical exercise in looking at the physical effects of anger could involve writing the different suggestions from the group on a large outline of a body.

➤ How you show your anger

People not only express their anger in different ways, they may also show anger differently according to the context they're in. Anger may be shown in a very controlled way, where the young person feels in command of their actions, or it may be uncontrolled and the young person may talk about 'not knowing what they were doing'. These are all important areas to explore.

Some people show anger in a visible and extroverted manner by shouting, slamming doors, swearing or even physical violence. Others show their anger in less visible ways like remaining quiet, ignoring, spreading false rumours or simply leaving a room. This way of showing anger does not mean the anger is less intense. It's common in anger management programmes to talk about 'visible' anger and 'invisible' anger to describe these two different reactions.

Some people may be very quick to show their anger - classically called 'hotheads' - others may be 'slow burners' building up to a point where their anger comes out, often in an intense way.

Practical exercises to draw out how young people show anger could include reviewing when young people have got angry in the past week and how they showed it. Alternatively, young people could score from 1 to 10 a range of ways of showing anger according to how often it applied to them.

➤ Cooling down and avoidance techniques

One of the problems with trying to help young people with their anger is that it may be almost impossible to remove the triggers or causes of the anger. For example, if a young person is struggling with various issues at home that provoke or cause anger, the reality may be that they have to continue living in that context and facing those issues. That means that learning to calm down as they feel anger rising, or cool down once they're angry, becomes the most useful practical outcome of taking part in an anger management group. Giving plenty of opportunity to explore these techniques is therefore important in the curriculum to be covered.

In fact, most young people instinctively know the cooling down techniques that work for them. When asked how they can cool down, almost all teenagers will be able to name something they do to calm down. Often it's listening to music, playing sports or doing something else physical, or perhaps lying on their bed at home. The first step in helping young people with cooling down techniques is therefore to help them recognise what already works for them and to think about using it not only when they have already got angry, but also when they sense that they are on the verge of doing so.

However, one way to calm down is usually not enough. Many methods may be impractical in school for example, and young people will need to think of other methods that they can have to hand to cover as many likely scenarios as possible. It's a good rule of thumb for young people to have three known ways of cooling or calming down that they can try if needed. The group will need to explore what alternative ways of cooling down work for them, especially in a school context.

Some of the methods known to work for young people include:

- **breathing exercises:** these are a very powerful tool for helping the body relax and bringing the heart rate down to more normal levels. Breathing exercises should be taught professionally and are one of the most effective methods of helping a young person calm down.
- **walking away:** removing yourself from the source of the anger sounds obvious, but it's often the last thing young people think of when they're faced with a difficult situation. This doesn't mean walking away from a teacher who is addressing them, but it might mean arranging to leave a classroom if a young person senses they are beginning to be in danger of getting angry. Some young people have negotiated a traffic light system where they have green, amber and red cards on their desk. If they feel there's a problem they can put a red card in sight and the teacher will allow them to step outside the classroom to go and sit in Learning Support for a few minutes before returning to class. This method obviously involves the cooperation of the school, but it's sometimes possible to make arrangements through the Learning Support Team.
- **stress balls:** because anger affects the body in such physical ways, movement and exercise is often a good way of helping a young person calm down. Where running or some other normal form of activity is difficult, using a stress ball is the next best option - the kind of soft executive stress reliever that you crush with your hand. This is often helpful if a young person feels themselves getting tense.

👉 **Alternatives to anger**

Helping a young person avoid anger is only one part of a good anger management programme. If they are going to successfully change their behaviour, they will need to learn new ways of coping with conflict. This means thinking about negotiation and assertiveness skills. For young people this may also involve the even harder of backing down or accepting authority. This is often very difficult for young people who have ongoing behavioural difficulties.

The group programme will need to look at how young people can develop these conflict resolution skills. Role playing is often a helpful tool in rehearsing common situations and the group can also report back on progress as the course continues.

👉 **Setting up and running a group**

Organising and running an anger management group presents some challenges in a school environment. Some of the most common issues are:

- 🔴 **Selecting young people to take part in a group:** It's vital that young people really do **want** to be part of the group and are genuinely ready to begin to tackle their problem with anger. Sometimes teachers will be keen for a particular young person to take part, but it's always important to establish for yourself that the young person is willing to take part. Groups full of young people whom the school have selected without the young people being genuinely willing are doomed to failure! The best practice is to meet each potential young person yourself and conduct a short 'initial assessment' where you can get to know them, explain the course and ensure that they want to participate.
- 🔴 **Finding a suitable time and room is also vital.** Often schools will be willing to allow you to meet during classes, with group members missing a lesson each week for the duration of the course. For practical reasons this is usually better than using a lunchtime, where time is likely to be too limiting. The room will need to be suitable too: perhaps the most important thing is to make sure it's private. Having pupils or staff walk through a room or appear at the door can be very disruptive. so you will need to choose somewhere where you will not be disturbed. Of course, schools may have only a few rooms available at any point, so you will

need to choose the best available.

- ✦ Ensure the time the group meets is suitable. Running a group during the last lesson of the day, for example, is likely to be difficult since the kind of students in the group are also likely to find good behaviour more difficult as the day progresses.
- ✦ If possible, it's much more useful to have two group leaders working together. This allows you to share the different exercise and elements of each meeting, and enables one person to be concentrating on watching the reactions and input of group members whilst the other leader runs an exercise.
- ✦ Groups vary in size and there are no hard and fast rules. However, as a rule of thumb, groups tend to work best with between 5 and 7 members. More than 7 begins to impact the intimacy of the group and also makes group exercises last too long.
- ✦ Anger management groups can run as long as is deemed necessary. Between 6 and 9 weeks is often about right, but much will depend on how long it takes to work through the planned curriculum. The most important point is to make a positive difference in the lives of the young people.

▶ **First meeting**

When a group meets for the first time, the group leaders face the challenge of 'creating' the group dynamics. Students may not know each other and will need to learn to trust each other if they are going to feel safe enough to talk honestly. The first meeting is also crucial in establishing the basic group rules that everyone will need to promise to keep. Group leaders will need to suggest these rules, but everyone needs to accept them. It's good practice to write these rules out and display them prominently during each meeting.

▶ **Group leading skills**

A detailed look at group leading skills is beyond the brief of this guide, but it almost goes without saying that these are essential. These skills involve not only being able to keep order and introduce exercises, but also to know how to frame and put questions to group members, show good reflective listening skills, and be able to help the group develop its own identity. These skills can be found listed in numerous books, but are also learned through experience. Again, the benefit of having two group leaders is that there is someone who can be listening and thinking about some of these issues whilst the other leader is coordinating an exercise.

▶ **Developing course material**

This guide is not meant to be a curriculum for an anger management group: it's simply an outline of the areas that a group should cover. If you want to run a group you will need to either develop your own material or purchase a ready-to-use course.

There is a proliferation of anger management course on the web, but many are very basic and geared towards individual study. The kind of course that works best for small groups will contain plenty of interactive exercises the group can work on together so you should make sure anything you consider buying contains these kind of practical resources. You may need to adapt the material you buy, including ideas from other sources and creating something suitable for the young people you're working with in the group.

➤ The Conflict Center in Denver produce a range of material including a middle school curriculum (for Keystage 3 in the UK): **www.conflictcenter.org**.

➤ Lucky Duck Publishing has a range of workbooks including 'Crucial Skills', a course for young people aged 11 to 16: www.luckyduck.co.uk/shop.

Training

You can check the training pages at schoolswork.co.uk for the latest list of training courses and events for leading anger management groups.

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