Learning to Manage ANGER

THE FIRST THING I TELL ATTENDEES is that my anger management program isn't really about anger management, but rather about emotional management—the understanding of ourselves and others.

BROSA / ISTOCK

Much of what the program does isn't about teaching things that attendees lack. Rather, it's about letting go. The letting go of limiting beliefs such as *I'm stupid*; the letting go of habits such as believing gossip; the letting go of "emotional chaining" to focus on primary emotions; the letting go of the need for others to be just like us.

The program also encourages new behaviors, often much simpler than what attendees are doing presently. Noted author and teacher Rick Lavoie reminds us that children, when faced with a new challenge, don't need a cheerleader so much as they need direct instruction. Attendees learn simple, yet powerful communication and confrontation tools.

This work is cognitive and behavioral and enjoys a very low rate of recidivism. As effective as these techniques are, many studies have confirmed that medication is often a valuable component of treatment. For some people, the right medication can create a clearing from which to do the cognitive-behavioral work.

Limiting beliefs

Quick: What's the purpose of an argument? If you answered *to win*, it's likely you carry limiting beliefs of what it means to lose an argument. You may believe that *losers are weak* or *if I lose, it'll be used against me*. There are consequences of winning arguments when you know you are in error.

- It makes the other person feel confused, often termed *crazy-making*.
- It undermines your real wins.
- It frames arguments as win-lose propositions as opposed to platforms for listening and being heard.
- It is not honest. Your win is at the cost of integrity.

If you need another reason to change, let me suggest that you have the opportunity to practice the very behavior you would want to see in others when they are wrong. For all the times it would have been appropriate to say *"I think you're right; let's do it your way,"* why is it that so many of us have never once spoken those words?

It's no coincidence that *You Mean I'm Not Crazy, Lazy, or Stupid?* is one of the bestselling books on ADHD. The title implies that many people with ADHD *believe* they are lazy, crazy, or stupid. What happens to the child experiencing the world through the belief of *I am stupid*? Some unconsciously become expert at detecting even the slightest hint that someone is insinuating stupidity and often find it even when it doesn't exist.

I had one client who headed a successful business in corporate team development. He'd often work with clients by

phone for years before meeting them face-to-face. More than once, that first face-to-face meeting went so badly that he and the client parted ways on the spot. With help, he uncovered a belief that because of his extremely youthful appearance, no one would take him seriously. While he did well when no one could see him, in face-to-face encounters that belief had him perceiving nonexistent attacks to which his reactions quickly unraveled the relationships.

If you don't believe that we can hear what's not there, dig up the *Candid Camera* episode in which an actor pretending to be a policeman waved over drivers. He then complimented them on a left turn he had witnessed them make. Not accurately hearing what was actually heard, many drivers lashed back, claiming that they had, in fact, made a good left turn. This phenomenon is what I call "violent agreement."

Author Anaïs Nin wrote, "We don't see the world as it is; we see it as we are." Beliefs are stealthy. They operate from a less-conscious part of our brain. When we're able to bring these limiting beliefs to the light of our consciousness, their power is diminished and we have the opportunity to assess and modify them.

Bad data

We humans easily and often get the data wrong. For a case in point, read the following out loud:

We
Get the
the Data
Wrong all
of the Time

Did you notice that it read "the the data"? One reason it is so easy to get the data wrong is that the seeing portion of the brain is made up from only 40 percent data from your eyes. The balance of what we see is made up from your life experiences, including your beliefs. We see, hear, smell, and sense with our brains. No wonder two individuals can view the exact same thing yet interpret opposite meanings.

When we're not distorting data internally, there is no shortage of external sources for bad data. Gossip is a key source of bad data. Conversations in bars (especially as it gets later in the evening) can be a great source of bad data. As a semiprofessional magician, I can readily demonstrate how easy it is to successfully deliver bad data in the form of an illusion; to the degree one is fooled, one simply got the data wrong. It's the very goal of con men to be sure you get the data wrong.

Another source of bad data comes in the violent agreement situations mentioned earlier. This occurs when those arguing are blind to what others plainly see—that the couple is actually in agreement. This happens frequently when the arguing partners have opposite personality types. I once asked a married couple with opposite personalities if there was ever a reason to estimate. In the same moment, he answered, "yes" and she answered "no." Another example takes the form of a Roosevelt quote taped to my wife's monitor that reads, "In the moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing." The personality-type opposite to hers would probably not agree. The point here isn't that one answer is right or wrong. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of self and others.

Edward L. Rowney once said, "Our biggest mistakes stem from the assumption that others are like us." As an arms-control negotiator he was referring to differences in people from differing nations, though I believe that he could have just as easily been describing families or couples. To minimize violent agreement, each attendee of my classes completes a Jungian-based personality tool so he or she might better understand his or her style, how other styles differ, and especially to understand the nature of his or her opposite personality type.

A purpose for our emotions?

As I intimated earlier, people who are angry all the time likely felt some other emotion prior to the anger. Some of us have trained our brain to race from frustration to anger to rage in a matter of seconds.

Anger is the degraded result of original emotions unattended. The most common emotion I see ahead of anger is frustration. I see this especially in those with ADHD. So common are frustration issues that Albert Ellis coined the term *low frustration tolerance*, which has been embraced by the ADHD community.

ADHD has other key features that impede emotional management: difficulties with working memory, time management, delayed development of internal language, emotion regulation, diminished problem-solving ability, and impulsive behavior. That's why handling one's ADHD is critical for any of this to work.

There is an old saying, "If you don't know who the sucker is in a poker game, it's you." Conversely, I often find that everyone but us is aware of the emotions we display, making us truly hostage to those emotions. Some other key emotions we address are overwhelmed, helplessness, embarrassment, confusion, and sadness.

We work with attendees to define and detect the original emotions because we teach that, in a healthy mind, each primary emotion serves a purpose.

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We depict emotions as alarms, each with a unique alert for us:

- Helplessness: *Seek help*
- Frustration: *Try something different*
- Overwhelmed: *Prioritize*
- Grief: *Expression and time*

The last source of bad data we address is our own self-talk. I always ask groups if they'd work for someone who spoke to them the way they speak to themselves. Would you? Though we can't turn off our self-talk, we can begin to better notice it and become more intentional and even scripted around our self-talk.

New behaviors

The key new behaviors come out of a communication model and confrontation model I teach. The communication model is a simple, two-step model:

- How do I feel?
- What do I need?

While simple to remember, it's not always easy to do. A great deal of work is often necessary to detect one's feelings and needs. Additionally, it often takes great courage to open our mouths and say something new.

The confrontation model is similar to others except that the last step is one I've seen nowhere else. That step allows the other party time. If the confronted person is unable to recognize his or her primary emotion (such as embarrassment or confusion), he or she may respond in anger. By giving the person time, you allow him or her to cool off to consider and possibly apply logic or creativity toward a solution to the confrontation. I'm reminded of Lao Tzu's words, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be."

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How does it work?

When I started my anger management programs eight years ago, I wondered how this could ever work. I thought that the court mandates to attend, the limited introspective experience, and the all-to-common inability to pay could be insurmountable.

Happily, I was wrong. The program does work. What I'd overlooked was that these folks are in pain. Nothing precedes change like pain.

That goes for our children, too. I'm reminded by Rick Lavoie that the parents who meet with him at his school aren't in tears because their children are struggling with math or history. They are in tears and suffering because their children are lacking friends, success, self-esteem, or joy. Our children want success. They want friends. Many hate that they have meltdowns. I encourage parents in my programs to model for their children the behavior they want to see in their children. Often this means the new practices the parents are learning—internal responsibility for their emotions, for their decision-making, and for self-encouragement and the encouragement of others. ●