

Practical Skills for Working with an Angry Client

An Internal Family Systems Approach to Anger

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Dr. Schwartz: For people that have a hairpin reaction to anger and rage, anger was probably their primary protector when they were young – or it was a part of them that got locked up when they were young, but has now sworn it would never let itself not be around anymore. Either way, it dominates all the time.

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The first kind we call managers. They’re trying to manage relationships by giving this hostile, edgy message all the time and keeping people at arm’s length.

The other is like borderline personality client; it has this terrible reputation of being seductive and luring you in so you’re close, and then — bam! — out of the blue comes their rage.

That’s more reactive. After you get close enough to them to maybe do some damage, this big protector is going to come in and push you away.

My interest in working with those parts is to learn about why they’re doing what they’re doing.

I don’t come with a lot of presumptions.

By getting the other parts that are terrified of this rage to step back, I can get the client to be at least a little curious as to why that anger does what it does, and figure out what it’s afraid would happen if it didn’t do that.

Invariably, in answering that last question, you’ll hear about a part that makes them very passive. They never stand up for themselves, and this anger is polarized with this other passive part that allows them to be taken advantage by everybody. That’s what we call a polarization between two parts.

Or two protectors, actually – they are protecting one of these exiled parts that carry a lot of pain, or an exiled part that’s stuck in some scene where they were betrayed or abused somehow.

We negotiate permission from the anger to find an exiled part, change it, and come back to the anger. Now, it's a lot softer. It's really the same process.

If it's real intense rage, there are models that say you shouldn't go to that exiled part until the client is stabilized and knows these coping skills and thus has a way to contain their other feelings.

Speaking to my experience, I think of these exiled parts as parts that are trying to protect, so you don't have to be afraid of them or the rage and the anger.

I'll go to these parts as soon as I can. I usually talk to it directly, rather than going through the client. We'll have a man-to-man conversation about why it has to be so tough, and what it's afraid would happen if it didn't.

Basically, they just say the same stuff about when the client was humiliated or hurt in some form, and it had to protect the client this way.

When you see it all like that – just like with the resistance, the shame, and the critics and so on – you start forming an appreciation for how they've been trying to protect the client.

And when you come to them with that, they respond in a corresponding way. They don't resist. They just tell you their story.

I can be in what I call myself – which has no judgement, just a lot of compassion and all the other 'c' words – calm, clarity, curiosity. There's eight of them.

If I approach angry people and these angry parts from that place, then it doesn't take long for the anger to dissipate, and we can get to the pain.

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If I come with my protective parts because I'm afraid they're going to be nasty to me, then I'll get into it with their angry parts and the anger will escalate.

A lot of the ability to work with people has to do with how you view them, how you can be in your body, and what kind of presence you bring.

I worked some years ago with a Vietnam vet who was terrified of his rage and had bottled it up pretty well.

But before he bottled it up, it ruined a couple of marriages and got him in trouble in a bar and so on.

He had good reason to try and lock it up. It's what we call a protector in exile, as opposed to an exile – which is a vulnerable part that carries a lot of pain inside.

The prospect of trying to go to that part and help it change was very daunting to him, because it had really done a lot of damage in his life. As I had him consider that and how he felt towards it, he was really, really scared of it.

I'm saying, "I get why you're so afraid of it, and you don't want to give it any more power or let it out of where you've jailed it up. I understand all of that. If you give us a chance, I can show you that it's not what you think. It's just part of you that's been stuck with this role of being the big, rage-filled protector. We can help it change. You don't have to spend all your energy keeping it bottled up. But to do that, you need to give us the space, so it's not afraid and it's not hating so much."

It took several sessions to convince these parts that it was safe to try that. But once they did, I asked, as always, "How do you feel toward it now?"

He said he actually had compassion for it suddenly. He could now feel how it actually had been trying to protect him, and he could extend that to his range.

Initially he had seen it as an internal monster, the image that he saw when he looked inside. But then, as these other parts stepped back, now it looked like a teenage kid – a teenage version of himself who looked angry.

Now, it felt to me like it was safe to have him talk to it.

I had him ask questions of why it was so angry. It told the story.

First, it showed some of the scenes from Vietnam, which I'd rather not even talk about.

But as we stayed it with it, it showed times in his life when his father was railing at him and humiliating him in front of his friends, and how this rage couldn't stand up to his father, but vowed that it would never let him be humiliated or attacked by anybody again.

It was that part that kept him alive in Vietnam. It was that part that would kill people, and so on. But, it doing that made him even more afraid of it.

After he got back from Vietnam, the ways it would destroy his marriages and get into fights made him even more afraid.

When he was able to contain it, his life got a lot better – but he always lived with the fear of triggering it again.