

# Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry

Case Study: How Feelings of Anger and Love Physically Affect Us

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Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry:

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## Case Study: How Feelings of Anger and Love Physically Affect Us

**Dr. Harrell:** With anger, there's some effective strategies that involve regulation of physiological response, identifying triggers, etc.

When we get to hostility, that's a much deeper embedded issue – because, as I mentioned, it's a way of being. It's not just a response; it's an adaptation that people have made to living in the world. I think hostility is a lot harder to work with – but possible.

If we think about hostility as basically relational, as an accumulation of perceived or actual hurts and pains without someone to protect and have compassion and inner being, then part of what we're building in the therapeutic relationship is a different experience – that one can have experiences of being hurt, offended, and disrespected, and have that be validated and there be compassion, relief, and intervention.

One of the challenges with hostile people is they don't engender warm, fuzzy, feelings from others. When clients come in hostile, we probably know that their presentation in the world is not engendering much loving feedback from others – and it may not from us as well, as therapists.

Part of our challenge is to find that place in ourselves that can feel that warm, loving feeling towards the client, so that the client can feel that from us – because ultimately, that's what needs healing with someone who is hostile. They need that sense, I'm heard. I'm understood. Someone will intervene. Someone cares.

“Anger is not just a response; it's an adaptation that people have made to living in the world. “

**Dr. Buczynski:** In this program, we explored many strategies for helping our clients approach anger in a healthier, more beneficial way.

I hope you found these insights helpful, and that you'll find ways to use them in your own practice.

Before we go, I wanted to visit Joan Borysenko one last time. Joan shared a story with me that I wanted to share.

I felt that it captures sort of the big “Why” behind this kind of work, and how what you're doing matters to so many people.

In the obvious ways, of course. But also in ways you may never know.

Thank you for being part of this program. I'll see you soon.

**Dr. Borysenko:** I'd been invited to go to a mandated school for kids in the juvenile justice system. It was scary. You had to go through a metal detector because these kids are likely to bring guns, knives, and all kinds of things to school.

The teacher said, "She works in the field of the mind and the body."

Then, "Can you give a short lecture to these students?"

I'm thinking, my god, this is the most frightening gig I've ever had. I don't work with adolescents or young people anyhow, and now there's a bunch of kids just sitting like that looking in the other direction.

How am I going to get their attention? I thought, god, I'll do a demonstration.

I hope it works. I hope it works . . .

And I asked them a question. I said, "What do you think is more powerful? Anger or Love?"

They laughed at me, like Anger is more powerful. Of course. What were you thinking?

So, I invited one of them up for a muscle testing demonstration – one of these things where you put the arm out and then press on it.

I said to him, "Think of something that makes you really angry."

When I did the muscle testing, I was relieved because he was incredibly weak. His arm could not really stay up at all. A little bit of force, and he caved.

I asked him what had made him angry, and he told me a story about his stepfather. It was an abuse story. It was clear that what was coming up for him also was a lot of sadness and a lot of vulnerability underneath the anger, making him weak.

Then I asked him to bring up an image of love.

Once again, we did the muscle testing – and he was so strong. He was so strong I could not move him.

And I said, "What did you think of when you thought of love?"

“We could really talk about anger – how it might be protective, but how the feelings underneath it makes us weak.”

And he said, “I thought of my little brother and how much I loved him, and how I would do anything to protect him and keep him safe.”

What then came out of this was a real discussion with this group of really traumatized and injured kids, where we could really talk about anger – how it might be protective, but how the feelings underneath it makes us weak, and love – what it really is about.

I still remember that. I think of it all the time.