

# Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry

Strategies To Help Your Clients Stay Engaged with Their Anger

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"There's nothing genetic that makes your hand reach out when you're angry to slap somebody. That's one of the choices we have as human beings."

**Mr. O'Hanlon:** He just looked at me like, *I never thought of those things. I thought when you were angry you had to . . .*

And I said, "There's nothing genetic that makes your hand reach out when you're angry to slap somebody. That's one of the choices we have as human beings. It's the difference between us and amoebas. You poke an amoeba, and it moves a certain way. It doesn't have

that many choices. Human beings have a lot of choices."

It was a revelation for him. He said, "I never thought of what else I could do."

He rarely got that angry, but he'd never thought there were options for expression.

I think that's an educational thing. There's a feeling, and then there's what you do with the feeling – how you express it, or whether you express it. Some people just don't have that idea. They just feel and they act. They feel and they act. There's not much of a moment.

Deepak Chopra talked about this. There's always this little moment of choice between the stimulus and the response. Victor Frankl talked about that too. That's what makes us human. I think some people don't get that.

**Dr. Buczynski:** We're going to take a look at a practice that has helped make a difference in hundreds of thousands of people's lives—I'm talking about mindfulness.

Many practitioners have been finding very effective ways of integrating mindfulness work into their anger interventions.

Marsha Linehan has long been using mindfulness to help her clients be more present with their feelings.

Here, we revisit Marsha to learn about the one crucial question she has clients ask themselves when anger suddenly appears.

**Dr. Linehan:** The first thing you have to do with people who have a problem with anger is to get them to

agree that being less angry would be in their best interest – that's the biggest issue.

With this particular group, we did a lot of pros and cons around: Is anger getting you in trouble?

Obviously, it was – they were in a program for anger, so we worked on that.

The first thing you have to do with people who have a problem with anger is to get them to agree that being less angry would be in their best interest."

You're also going to want to look at what's setting off the anger and what the beliefs are that keep it going.

The average person who's angry almost always believes they have a right to be angry.

You can ask yourself, "Does the anger fit the facts?" Now, it turns out anger fits the facts a lot of the time.

The function of anger is to get you to engage in behaviors that keep you from being attacked or harmed by other people, and that fits the facts when your goals are being interrupted by another person.

A perfect example of anger that fits the facts is when you're driving and a car cuts in front of you. Now, it fits the facts, but it's not effective: when a car cuts in front of you and you decide to act on your anger, you're going to run after that car, which is never effective.

"Usually, anger is an emotion that almost always fits the facts, but, you have to know the skill of effectiveness."

Usually, anger is an emotion that almost always fits the facts, but, you have to know the skill of effectiveness.

Effectiveness is being angry and acting on your anger that is in your best interest. You have to sell to your client the idea that behavior that's in their interests is what they want to do, and behavior that's not in their interests is behavior they do not want to do.

They have to get the concept of effectiveness, which is a whole other skill that we teach – and I'll give you an example of that with anger.

We had a client who had a lot of physical pain. Back in the day, her physician had given her "pain cocktails," but now she is in a hospital for mental disorders. She starts having a lot of pain, and she goes to the nurses and says, "I want my pain cocktail," at which point the nurse says, "I'm sorry, we don't give the pain cocktail out unless you take these other medications – Tylenol or something like that – first. If they don't work, then we'll

give you the pain cocktail.”

She screams, “What are you talking about? Those never help my pain. I have to have my pain cocktail.”

The nurse says, “No, you have to take this first. If it doesn’t work in this amount of time, we’ll give you the cocktail.”

“No, you can’t do that to me... call my doctor.”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t call doctors at night for medication.”

“What do you mean?” And the confrontation continues...

“This is largely about sales – where you’re selling ideas to your client, and in particular, the idea of being effective instead of ineffective.”

She tells me what happened next. “I was under the bed, Marsha, and I thought of you, and then I thought, Is this effective?

“I remembered that this was not effective, so I raced out and said to the nurse, “Give me that Tylenol right this minute.” She took her Tylenol and she got her medicine.

Once again, you can see how this is largely about sales – where you’re selling ideas to your client, and in particular, the idea of being effective instead of ineffective.

That’s when you recognize that anger usually fits the facts. We don’t get angry at things that don’t interfere with our lives, our goals or what we want. That’s the whole reason for having anger in the first place – so that people will protect themselves and their families, and not let people hurt or kill them.

In other words, anger has huge value, and that’s what is most important to remember about all the emotions – they all have important value.

You’re not trying to get rid of the emotion – you’re trying to teach whether or not it is useful – when it makes sense, when it’s in your interest, and when it’s effective.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Marsha said, we’re not just trying to eliminate a client’s anger.

It can often serve them better to learn healthier ways to live with it.

To expand on Marsha’s idea of effective and ineffective anger, here are some further insights from Joan Borysenko and Bill O’Hanlon.

**Dr. Borysenko:** The day comes for the first of six mind-body groups that we're going to give. I had a colleague in this study who was a graduate student in the psych department at Harvard. We're doing our efficient little things, and we've got our lists, and we're setting up the chairs, and getting everything ready.

This big, great, beefy angry man is the first person who comes in. He looks at me and he looks at Carolyn, the graduate student, and he says something incredibly mean and snarky. He said, "Look at you two aggressive women from Harvard with your pursed lips. I hate people like you." A lovely way to start a group.

I thought, gosh. I thought we'd gotten beyond that before. I looked at him and said, "Nobody behaves in any way unless it helps them in some way. So, I just want to ask you – How does being so angry help you?"

This is a direct quote – "It keeps the assholes away."

And I looked at him and said, "So you really need to keep Carolyn and me away? Are we assholes too?"

He thought about this, and he thought about it, and he thought about it a little more. He took that in. And I said, "Because really, it does. It does work. It keeps us away."

He began to reflect on that. I think there was something about the very act of being asked about the anger that engaged him – "Is this working for you? Why do you do it?"

"People who are angry are so frightening that we are afraid to ask them questions. But it's the questioning and the self-inquiry that can lead to tremendous breakthroughs."

The mind-body intervention was a great deal about meditation and mindfulness, and all emotions being valid emotions. Because of this, I think he got enrolled in it a bit. He turned out to be one of our star pupils and ended up volunteering for us in other parts of the study.

I think sometimes, people who are angry are so frightening that we are afraid to ask them questions. But it's the questioning and the self-inquiry that can lead to tremendous breakthroughs, as it did with him.

**Mr. O'Hanlon:** When I was growing up, my father had quite a temper – and he had sort of a road rage temper. We'd be driving down the street, and someone would do something, and it would upset him and he'd start screaming at them. If they took too long at the stop sign, he'd be yelling "It says S-T-O-P, not P-A-R-K!"

One day, my mom turned to him and said, "Bob, they can't hear you – but I can. It's really upsetting to me

when you yell all the time when we're driving."

I think it sort of stunned him.

It made me think of what Marsha Linehan was talking about. Not that anger is bad, but the way you express it is either effective or it's not.

It's how you're expressing it and to whom.

My father was yelling at my mother and the kids in the car. The windows were up. Nobody could hear him except us. You're expressing it to the wrong person and ineffectively.

I tell stories like that in therapy to remind people: make sure it's to the right person and that it's effective.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Learning to assess anger's effectiveness can help our clients develop more creative solutions to their problems.

In the next lesson, we'll look at how mindful thinking can help diminish acts of aggression. I'll see you there.

"Make sure it's to the  
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it's effective."