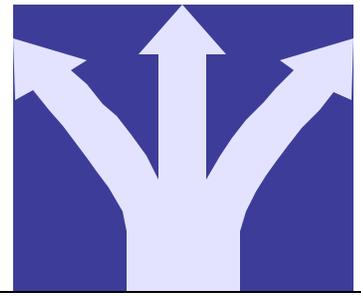


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Women and Anger

It is our experience that at any given time, there are likely to be 2 to 3 times more men than women enrolled in our anger management treatment program. In general, there appears to be a paucity of anger management programs offered for women. Does this mean that women are less angry than men? We don't think so.

Some authors (Bernadez, Baker Miller, Lerner) suggest that there are longstanding cultural prohibitions to women's expression of anger. So although women may *feel* angry as much as men do, the expression of that anger often looks different than that of men or it may be suppressed. Dr. Sandra Thomas notes, "Although there are some conflicting findings...studies generally show that men are more likely than women to vent anger in verbal and physical aggression."

Dr. Jean Baker Miller of the Stone Center at Wellesley College, suggests the following reasons as to why women are less likely to express their anger more directly:

- 1) Many women feel they are in subordinate relationships either personally or vocationally where the expression of feelings, particularly anger, is not permitted. There is a fear of retaliation from the one in power.
- 2) Women have been socialized to think that anger is not an appropriate feeling for a woman to experience. Women are viewed as caretakers and nurturers in our society and these roles are inconsistent with anger. Women who outwardly express their anger are often considered unfeminine. Interestingly enough, one of the few ways that a woman's expression of anger is sanctioned in our society is around a mother protecting her children.

- 3) Women fear that the expression of anger may disrupt a valued relationship. Yet dissatisfaction in personal relationships is frequently cited as a cause of women's anger. Dr. Thomas notes that women's anger narratives frequently refer to their powerlessness to make changes in their intimate relationships. Many women become angry around a perceived lack of reciprocity in relationships (ex. "She hasn't returned my calls.") but fear expressing anger because it will result in a loss of that relationship ("If I tell her I'm upset about not returning my calls, she won't be my friend.")

Researcher Debra Cox, Ph.D. psychologist and assistant professor at Southwest Missouri State University found in a 2000 study that women view anger as counter productive. In focus groups, women noted that they often try to hide or suppress angry feelings. When anger is expressed, women often apologize for it. Dr. Cox did find, however, that when the situation calls for it, women can and do use their anger selectively, for a purpose (ex. negotiating terms of a divorce settlement).

The inability of a woman to express her angry feelings leads to resentment, feelings of inadequacy, frustration and low self esteem. When some women finally communicate their anger, it may be an exaggerated response. The woman appears "hysterical" and the stereotype of the angry woman as "sick" or "disturbed" is reinforced. It is no wonder that the root of the word "hysterical" comes from the Latin word "hyster" meaning uterus with the implication being that this kind of rage or "psychoneurotic disorder" (Webster's Dictionary definition) is particular to women.

So although women may not exhibit as many inappropriate expressions of anger in the form of physical or verbal aggression as men do, there are many

(Continued)

women who suffer from the consequences of inadequately expressed anger. Mismanaged anger has been implicated in depression, high blood pressure, migraine headaches, obesity and addictions. There are also outwardly hurtful ways women express their anger toward others such as backbiting, malicious gossip or giving someone the “cold-shoulder.”

A first step for women to deal with their anger is to explore those factors that impede their expression of anger. Laura Petracek in her workbook for women about anger lists a number of obstacles that include:

- ◆ Believing that anger is destructive or negative;
- ◆ Fear of being called names;
- ◆ Fear of retaliation by another;
- ◆ Scared of the energy released by anger.

As a woman works on these obstacles to expressing anger, she can come to a greater acceptance of these feeling. She can also come to identify ways to verbalize anger that are more emotionally and physically healthy.

Sources Of Information:

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5. Petracek, Laura J. The Anger Workbook for Women, A New Harbinger Self-Help Workbook; Oakland, CA, 2004.*
6. Thomas, Sandra. “Men’s Anger: A Phenomenological Exploration of its Meaning in a Middle Class Sample of American Men,” Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 2003, 4, 2, 163-175.

*For General Audience

As noted above, Outlook Associates of New England does provide anger management treatment for women in our practice. We offer both group and individual treatment. Please contact Lisa Majewski, LICSW at 781-643-5251, Ext 1 or lmajewski@outlookassociates.com for further information.

FROM OUR FILES:

Looking at the Face of Anger

An experiment conducted at the University of Wisconsin shows that abused children are extraordinarily sensitive to signs of anger in facial expressions.

Researchers observed child abuse victims and controls while they watched faces on a screen. The children were asked to compare the expressions on the faces with standard facial representations of happiness, fear, sadness and anger. As a face gradually “morphed” from one expression to another, the children were asked to say which expression it most closely resembled.

All the children marked more or less the same points of transition between happiness, fear and sadness, but the abuse victims were much quicker to see fear and sadness change to anger. Apparently, tracking incipient anger had become so important for them they tended to see it where others did not. This way of seeing might once have been adaptive, and for some of them still might be. But it also raised the risk that they would respond aggressively to non-existent threats.

(Taken from Harvard Mental Health Letter, May 2003)

Violent Lyrics Lead to Hostile Thoughts

A song with violent lyrics, whether it is set to the tune of rock or rap, may promote violence by increasing aggressive and hostile thoughts in the mind of the listener. A study of college students found surges in aggression-related thoughts and emotions were directly related to the violent content of the music they had just listened to.

The study, which appears in the May 2003 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* compared the effects of seven songs with violent lyrics to eight non-violent songs among a group of more than 500 college students over a series of 5 experiments. The students listened to the songs and then were given a series of psychological tests to measure aggressive thoughts and feelings.

The study found that songs with violent lyrics consistent increased aggressive thoughts regardless of musical style or the use of humor. Researchers say the violence in the music prompted feelings of hostility without provocation or threat, which could later lead to violent behavior.

“Aggressive thoughts can influence perceptions of ongoing social interactions, coloring them with an aggressive tint.” said researcher Craig Anderson, PhD of Iowa State University in a news release.

(Taken from WebMD, May 2003)