

Rethinking Anger: The Bioenergetic Therapy Approach
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The graphic video of George Floyd losing speech, pleading for breath and falling unconscious while a police officer calmly knelt on his neck led people around the world to feel intense shock and outrage. In the widespread protests that followed, Americans expressed their collective anger about police violence and systemic racism that perpetuates it. This anger, channeled into action for justice and reform already has and, with perseverance, will continue to lead to significant positive changes in the role of police and the treatment of people of color. These changes uplift all of us.

Common therapeutic approaches for working with anger, however, focus on controlling and preventing anger. Often, clients who express anger become identified as being “dis-regulated.” Treatment focuses on management and self-regulation, while the bigger problem related to anger may be that many people are unaware of their anger and chronically repress it.

The integrated body mind work of bioenergetic therapy provides tools to help clients access their anger and express it physically in safe ways. From the perspective of bioenergetic therapy, anger is as a natural response to being harmed. Anger provides the message that our boundaries are violated or that we have lost something dear to us. Anger fuels energy to speak up or take action to change the situation. This energy can move a person to take risks of self-expression or self-assertion which they would otherwise not take. Bioenergetic therapists provide opportunities for clients to explore both expression and containment of their anger and to identify how to use their anger effectively in their lives.

When a person has learned, for example, that they are not allowed to be angry, they often lose their ability to influence important life changes. They may put up with chronic violations of their boundaries, for example, which can contribute to low self-esteem, hopelessness and unhappiness. A person may question their worth or harm themselves rather than speak up and advocate for themselves, others, or something they value. They may tolerate bad treatment from people, including spouses, children, coworkers, bosses, parents and friends. They may have learned that expressing anger is bad, that it's not safe and may, perhaps, believe that they have no choice but to be mistreated. In the US displays of anger are generally viewed as maladaptive. This has been especially difficult for oppressed groups, such as people of color. They are rightfully angry about their treatment, but if they express it, they are viewed as dangerous, scary and needing control.

Chronically suppressing anger contributes to a variety of other problems. Persistent physical tensions used in holding back anger can lead to TMJ, constipation, headaches and high blood pressure. Repressed anger often underlies mental health conditions such as depression and substance abuse. It can lead to inappropriate outbursts as in road rage or abuse of people or animals. Sometimes people experience

anxiety in response to anger rising in their body. This feeling may not be identified as the cause of their anxiety. At other times people express anger as a cover for tender feelings such as sadness or fear.

Bioenergetic therapists identify varying sources and different modes of expression of anger. Some anger, for example, relates to mistreatment from the past. Other anger explodes in direct response to a violation, such as the burning of police stations after the murder of George Floyd. Some anger is in response to circumstances we cannot externally change, such as the loss of so many things due to the Coronavirus. Different sources of anger call for different expressions. The anger required for changing policy and mistreatment, for example, may simmer beneath the surface but fuels the persistence necessary for significant changes. Containing anger serves as the most effective approach in other situations.

Bioenergetic therapists help clients become aware of tense muscles in their bodies which inhibit the movement of anger. We work with exercises that allow clients to explore these tensions, to release them, and to experience their anger fully without harming themselves or anyone else. We utilize a variety of physical techniques to help people express anger. Bioenergetic therapists have tools such as a bat and/or racket, large pillows, towels and cushions in their offices. A towel often comes in handy for twisting. A mattress give people the opportunity to lie down and kick, to express anger about things they can't change. When a client presents an issue relating to suppressed anger, we invite our clients to express the emotion with a full bodied approach. With the guidance of a trained Bioenergetic therapist, a person can overcome their fear of their anger. They can release anger from the past and learn to channel it in a healthy way going forward, with options other than suppression or explosion.

The value of working with expressing anger physically rather than talking about it, can be compared to the value of going for a walk vs talking about going for a walk. In working with a bioenergetic therapist, a client can begin to identify and feel the sensation of anger moving through their body. They can feel the muscles that have held back the expression and experiment with allowing the emotion to move through freely. They are guided to become more aware of the physical sensations which alert them to an issue that needs to be addressed. This is new for many people and requires gradual work along with grounding and integration. Clients can explore the intensity of their anger without being afraid of hurting themselves, something or someone else.

In the exercises, bioenergetic therapists encourage clients to practice combining words with physical expression. We encourage clients to say words or a phrase to match what they feel such as "I hate you" or "NO" or "stop it" or "no more." Clients are encouraged to match the tone of their voice and use words that reflect the energy of their movements. This creates an integrated mind/body experience.

Clients, almost universally, report feeling calmer, more relaxed, freer and/or stronger as a result of working with anger in therapy sessions. As in the analogy of going for a walk, their muscles have worked and can then relax. Clients can freely work out anger

from past violations in a safe way. They can build strength in their body which often helps them express themselves more strongly in the present.

This work often leads to significant changes in clients' lives. They may speak up to a spouse who had previously treated them badly, they may stop allowing others to take advantage of them, or they may experience the easing of depression. They often have increased energy to channel in positive ways.

What needs to change, based on the presence of anger, varies by the situation. Sometimes a client needs help practicing speaking their anger directly towards someone important to them, to influence change in that person's behavior. Other times, for example with frustration about something a person cannot externally change, the important shift may be internal. To move towards homeostasis, a person may need to change their expectations and/or beliefs. The situation may require letting go of dreams and/or desires for a specific outcome. Due to the current Coronavirus precautions nearly everyone is experiencing this type of frustration with the multitude of disappointments and/or significant life challenges we face. Releasing the energy of the frustration through a bioenergetic exercise and acknowledging the feeling - anger/frustration/disappointment helps in moving toward the internal change of acceptance. The important part of this, as I tell my clients, however, is that just because we accept something does not mean we have to like it.

In other situations the change prompted by the anger may involve directing rage about a trauma, an assault or similar violation outward, in the energy of the exercise, rather than against the self. When people are not allowed their anger as children they generally learn to blame themselves when bad things happen in their lives. Self-blame cripples many, many people. Anger directed against the self often underlies the pain of deep shame. Directing anger outwards in the safety of a contained situation allows clients the opportunity to place the anger where it belongs, energetically, rather than against themselves. The therapist's support in the exercise inherently affirms that the client is not to blame.

In training to become a bioenergetic therapist, trainees learn various techniques for working with anger and when to use them based on the client's needs. With clients who have had problems with their anger, for instance, an exercise of accessing anger and practicing containing it may be most appropriate. Other clients, who are unfamiliar with expressing anger, benefit from starting with something like stomping their feet or twisting a towel. Everyone can benefit, at one time or another, from laying on their back on a mattresses kicking and yelling, as in a temper tantrum, to release frustration.

Bioenergetic trainees also learn to guide clients in a fundamental bioenergetic exercise of grounding, by pressing into one's feet and legs, to integrate this new expression and release. Further, bioenergetic trainees are taught to help clients explore the impact of their history, especially their early childhood, to understand the influences which have shaped their current responses. Throughout the training, trainees learn to help clients

both assert their anger effectively to influence the change they want to make and contain their anger when this fits their best interest.

Some clients initially express fear of doing these exercises stating, for instance, “I’m not a violent person” or “I don’t want to be like ...(whoever it was who hurt them)” or “I’m afraid I will hurt someone with my anger.” However, with gentle encouragement and a reminder that by hitting a pillow they are not hurting themselves or anyone else, they almost always find significant value from the exercises. Encouragement from the therapist underscores the message that anger can be safely expressed. People may need to repeat the exercise several times, especially when something comes up in their current life to trigger their anger. Most people, over time, have fewer outbursts of anger and instead, become calmer and more even tempered. They stop using their body’s energy to control the pent up anger and thus have more energy available for enjoying their life.

Working with anger provides one of many effective body based techniques used by bioenergetic therapists. Psychotherapeutic processes, including exploring and understanding the impact of early childhood experience on a person’s current situation, guide the therapy. Bioenergetic therapists value building a strong therapeutic alliance with their clients. Working through the impact of trauma, especially the impact of unconscious early developmental trauma on a person’s body and psyche, provides the foundation of the work.