

Calling it Anger Adds to the Danger: Anger Management Policy Statement

by Phyllis B. Frank and Gail K. Golden

Our counseling agency intentionally does not offer what has been referred to as "anger management" programs. With decades of experience to draw upon, we have determined that most people who are thought to need anger management programs already know how to manage their anger, and do so, on a daily basis in a wide variety of settings.

It is particularly worrisome when a man is ordered to an anger management program due to his "anger" at a woman who is his wife or intimate partner. Such men have historically been assessed to be "out of control," that is, they are seen as unable to control their anger and are then sent to anger management programs to fix or cure that inability. However, we maintain that if the same man is functioning satisfactorily in the workplace, community or place of worship, then another level of assessment must be made. In other words, if frustrations with supervisors, work mates, shop keepers, police, teachers, etc., (all of whom can cause serious annoyance at one time or another) do not routinely result in "loss of control" or "losing it" -- then he already is exhibiting his functional anger management skills.

The following example clarifies this point: A therapy client explained that his abuse of his wife was a result of her getting him very angry. The therapist asked if she, herself, was in any danger from him - as she might say something to anger him, too. The man was absolutely stunned that the therapist asked that question. He was clear and able to offer complete assurance that under no circumstances would he 'lose control' or do anything abusive in that setting.

An assault against the therapist, or anyone other than his partner, would be unacceptable and, importantly, would have very serious consequences. He knows that. And he, therefore, controls himself well enough to stay out of trouble. Generally, the only person with whom he does not control himself is his intimate female partner.

When it is evident from a person's total profile that he is "out of control" with only his intimate partner, and in control with all others in his life, we believe it is crucial for courts to reject anger management programs as a remedy. Anger management, as a concept, minimizes the seriousness of abuse. Instead, we strongly urge courts to hold domestic violence offenders accountable for their acts by imposing the most serious sanctions allowable in relation to the domestic violence acts committed.

Abusive and violent behavior against female partners has been condoned for centuries and has only recently been deemed unacceptable. Although such behavior is now considered a crime, sanctions imposed on offenders remain erratically and arbitrarily applied. It is this failure to hold domestic violence offenders accountable for their actions that most needs to be "managed".

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