

Look back at anger

By Brendan O'Neill

If there's one emotion you are supposed to keep bottled up, it's anger - which means big business for anyone giving lessons to those who find it difficult to control themselves. But is anger as bad as it's made out to be?

"I have never seen a more flagrant contempt of court", said Scottish judge Roderick MacDonald girl giving evidence in his courtroom swore at him and told him where to go.

How did he punish the 15-year-old? By putting her on probation for a year and ordering her to attend classes.

"Anger management" is all the rage - not only for youngsters who fall foul of the law, but for stressed-out bosses who bark at their workers, tense school kids who display signs of bullying behaviour, and football managers who take their frustrations out on the "effing ref".

That includes Ian Holloway, manager of Queen's Park Rangers. He attended an anger management course earlier this year as part of the BBC's Stress Test programme, following a series of run-ins with refs and after players complained about the "rollickings" he gave them in the changing room.

The management of anger has become big business; there is a veritable industry devoted to helping us keep our tempers in check.

The British Association of Anger Management (BAAM), the UK's "centre of expertise" on anger and conflict management, has a team of consultants, counsellors and trainers who offer anger advice to the general public, children and teenagers, government bodies, corporations, the educational sector, personnel managers, and anyone else "dealing with their own or another's anger".

BAAM says its mission is to "extinguish the flames". "Anger is a natural human reaction", it says. "It is powerful. If not channelled correctly it is dangerous. It has massive social implications on your family, your career and ultimately YOU...."

Stress-beater?

The California-based company Anderson and Anderson describes itself as the "first global anger management training provider". It has Certified Anger Management Facilitators in the US, Canada, South Africa, Mexico, England, Ireland and Italy, offering anger management tips to everyone from law enforcement personnel to corporate executives to schoolteachers and their charges.

Is this rise in anger management a good thing, promising to transform us into happier, less-stressed, calmer citizens? Or does it smack of an attempt to enforce emotional conformity - threatening to make society placid, passion-free and ever-so-slightly dull?

The British Association of Anger Management (BAAM) says Brits definitely need lessons in how

It says that in a survey, 65% of office workers had experienced "office rage"; 53% had been the victims of bullying at work; and 45% of staff regularly lost their temper at work - which may not be surprising when you consider that the average modern working day consists of dealing with 46 phone calls, 15 internal memos, 19 items of external post and 22 e-mails.

Britain is reportedly the top road rage country in the European Union - 80.4% of drivers claim to have been involved in road rage incidents, and one in four drivers admits to having "committed a road rage incident".

Then there's "shopping rage" - Britons spend 407 hours per person per year shopping, and over half of us have stormed out of a shop due to "bad service" or "feelings of frustration".

Anger seems to follow Brits even when they go on holidays abroad - 14% get stressed out about time off work, and apparently there was a 400% increase in incidents of "air rage" between 1997 and 2000.

Fear and insecurity

BAAM says most of us handle all this stress, anger and rage badly. We tend to fall into one of two camps, it says: exploders or imploders. Exploders quickly move "from anger into rage"; they have "adult temper tantrums". "Exploders are irrational in their regressed state and cause harm to themselves and to those around them".

Imploders, meanwhile, bottle their anger up because of "fear, insecurity and low self-esteem". "Initially it appears to cause little harm. But imploders cannot hold the anger in forever... They are walking time bombs, just waiting to explode."

The aim of anger management, therefore, is to help people avoid being either an exploder or an imploder; to ensure that anger is channelled positively.

Others are not convinced. For Professor Frank Furedi, author of *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*, the rise and rise of anger management is proof of an "emotionally conformist" climate.



"Emotionally we are encouraged to 'let it all hang out'. But some emotions, such as anger and passion, have clearly been deemed unacceptable," says Furedi.

"Society praises some emotions but stigmatises others. There is now an authoritarian framework of acceptable emotions and behaviour, and if you step outside of that framework then you clearly need to be managed and re-educated."

Dr Tana Dineen, the Canadian-based author of *Manufacturing Victims* and a well-known critic of what she refers to as the "psychology industry", says the anger management lobby overlooks one important thing - anger can be a good thing.

Some of the great social advances of the 20th Century, such as votes for women and civil rights spurred by individuals' feelings of anger.

"Anger can be positive", says Dr Dineen. "It used to be thought of as a generally normal and common emotional reaction evoked by something in the external world that the person thinks is wrong. If attention is paid to that, rather than to the internal situation, certainly anger can spur people on to actions that produce positive change."

Indeed, being angry was once positively celebrated. Think back to the "angry young men" of the late 1950s and early 1960s, those authors and playwrights such as Alan Sillitoe and John Osborne who peopled their books and plays with brooding blokes who wanted to take on the world.

Arthur Seaton, the working-class factory hand who hated his bosses in Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, later played by an angry young Albert Finney in the film version of 1960, declared: "I'm a bloody billygoat trying to screw the world, and no wonder I am, because it's trying to do the same to me...."

Dr Dineen reckons the likes of Arthur Seaton would be sent off for a course in anger management these days, to have his emotional imbalance corrected. "We should defend anger from the interfering grasp of psychological theories and treatments", she says.

