

Look back at anger

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by Ariel Leve

From seething stars to peeved politicians, everyone's doing anger management. Ariel Leve finds out why it's all the rage

In the colossal list of things wrong with me, being an angry person has never ranked high. I am impatient, but I don't lose my temper. I am volatile, but I don't hit people. I get angry over something I have little control over, but quickly the anger turns into frustration. I'll grind my teeth at night or develop a pain in my stomach, which means the frustration is immediately sidelined by worry that I might have given myself an ulcer. But then I remember I can't afford to have an ulcer, so I am reminded that whatever I'm upset about isn't worth it, and this, for reasons only a therapist could explain, is my form of anger management.

George Anderson has a different method. A Harvard-trained psychotherapist turned entrepreneur, he virtually invented the industry of anger management. Based in California, his clients include Hollywood studios that send their angry stars and executives to him, the Department of Defense and even the vice-president's old company, Halliburton.

Anger is a booming business. Soon Anderson will begin selling franchises abroad. So why now? Anger has been around since the beginning of time, but behaviour that was once tolerated isn't any more, by individuals, employers, courts and legislators.

Anderson & Anderson has become the world's largest provider for anger-management certification and classes. When you hear about someone being ordered by the court, this is where they are sent. George Anderson also provides "executive coaching", where he works privately with CEOs, law enforcement, movie stars — and now, me.

At the Los Angeles headquarters of Anderson & Anderson, I am given two questionnaires. One is called the "anger management map" and the second will determine my emotional intelligence. My scores will be tallied and I will meet Mr Anderson, privately, to discuss the results.

He is an affable man. He begins by making the point that anger is a secondary emotion. There is always something else that precedes the anger, and commonly it's stress, frustration, disappointment, anxiety, shame, etc. "Anger is a normal human emotion," he says. "Everyone experiences anger. It is only a problem when it is too intense, occurs too frequently, leads to harm of the self or others — if it leads to violence." In other words, always?

"When you are tired, are you less patient than when you're not?" he asks. I tell him yes. He asks if I'm more likely to be irritable. Yes. "What about when you're hungry?" Yes, I become tense and would lean towards being less charitable to others. "So something came before the anger and it's how you respond to it."

This seems obvious. What came before the anger was not eating. How I responded to it? Having a sandwich. But what about a more complex emotional minefield? Rapidly, I fire off the what-ifs. "What if there is someone married to someone mentally ill? Or an alcoholic? What if there is a family member with a permanent disability?"

Anderson reiterates that you can't change the feelings, you can only respond differently and change your behaviour. Part of this is common sense and part is emotional discipline. I have neither.

We go over my results on the emotional intelligence scoring grid. I did well in self-awareness, emotional awareness of others and creativity. But I scored abysmally low — as in the bottom range of "CAUTION" — for resilience (defined as an ability to bounce back and retain a hopefulness about the future); trust radius (the degree to which I expect people to be inherently "good" and an inclination to trust until there is reason not to) and personal power (the degree to which I believe I can meet life's challenges). Anderson tells me the opposite of personal power is hopelessness and helplessness, and based on the results of my tests, anger is the least of my problems.

This makes sense. If I have no reason to trust, and no reason to be hopeful, then no wonder I'm not angry — I'm always prepared to be disappointed. And if anger is the result of unrealistic expectations, my expectations are so low to begin with I have nowhere to go but up. So, as I see it, scoring low in these areas is a good thing.

But Anderson isn't convinced. As I defend my hopeless existence, I can see him begin to squirm. Hopelessness is not exactly the control mechanism that he's advocating. The more he tries to improve my trust radius, the more sceptical I become. Just then, something occurs to me. Have I succeeded in making the guru of anger management... angry? There is a moment of silence while he stares at me. Speechless. But then he laughs. "Well, you're from New York," he says.

There is no scientific proof that Anderson's anger-management training and classes work. But they can't hurt. The real question is whether there is any long-term and significant change, since these classes are not treating the deeper issues. Shame, fear, mental illness, pathologies — all of this must be addressed in psychotherapy and counselling.

Having experienced a few hours of the executive coaching, I am invited to sit in on one of the classes. A semicircle of strangers are seated in a small room. They are breathing deeply and following instructions from a relaxation tape. It's making me jittery. I am the only one whose eyes are not shut, so I look around. Five men, one woman.

Jessica, 21, dressed in black with dark wavy hair and blue eyes, punched a police officer. Karl needs tools to manage his stress. Richard, a soft-spoken middle-aged dad in khaki trousers and a variety of pens in his shirt pocket, was ordered to attend for 52 weeks by the court for being verbally abusive to his ex-wife. He is in week 51. Each person has brought their "anger log", where incidents that occurred during the week are recorded and then discussed.

In this room, there are two posters on the wall. The Wheel of Destructive Interactions, and the Wheel of Constructive Interactions.

For the next two hours, one by one, episodes where anger was displayed during the week are candidly shared, and people are asked to identify the hostility, rage, avoidance, manipulation, etc, on the negative wheel, and then refer to the constructive wheel (expressing feelings, seeking compromise, stating needs, etc) to pinpoint what they would have done differently. Nobody is being told not to be angry, they are being taught skills to manage anger.

Anderson & Anderson calls the shots because there are no laws regarding anger management. The courts rely on the company to set the standards — 26 weeks is the average. For the client to gain something, he or she has to do the exercises. The stress log and anger log must be completed every day, so they learn to know in advance the situations that would stress them out — and then do something about it.

Sean Coffey, a Brit, met George Anderson after reading an article on him. His background was in psychology and he's had various jobs, such as caddying, coaching football and running a promotion agency. He plans to open an Anderson clinic in London.

But will the British be able to speak as candidly as Americans? He tells me: "They do find it difficult to express their emotions, unless they feel aggrieved about something in particular. Ironically, the higher up the social scale one goes, and the more eloquent one would expect them to be — the less likely they are to verbalise their emotions and so it stays bottled up."

And just as it took years for the benefits of psychology and psychiatry to filter through to Britain, Coffey fears it may be the same for anger management. "I'm not sure that British people are ready to pay for this service," he says. "Also, admitting that one requires psychiatric or psychological assistance is seen as a sign of weakness."

The difference between the types of anger displayed and experienced by people in Britain and in the United States has mainly to do with alcohol-related violence (the UK beats the US) and weapon-related violence (the US is the winner by far). The common ground is car-related violence, where both nations have unrealistic expectations when it comes to traffic and journey times.

Back in my hotel room and unable to sleep, I turn on the television. There is yet another form of anger management. It's called Star Wars. And the wisdom of Yoda is undeniable. "Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering." That's 52 weeks of class right there.