

## Treating Anger for Profit - Los Angeles Times

Courts: Many judges order offenders to take courses to control their tempers. But there are no standards for such classes and teachers may have no training in the field.

By ANNA GORMAN, TIMES STAFF WRITER

Sandra Whatley threw a soda at a police officer who stopped her for jaywalking. Kazutoshi Yakota brawled with a fellow college student over a woman. Moheb Helmy got into a shouting match with his mother and yelled at the cop who came to break it up.

The explosions landed all three in Los Angeles courtrooms--and as a result, in anger management classes. At the weekly sessions that are part of their sentences, they discuss their outbursts and describe their feelings in their anger control workbooks. The aim is to learn how to reduce rage by taking timeouts, breathing deeply and using such phrases as "I did wrong" rather than "When will you ever learn?"

Criminal and traffic court judges in California are increasingly using such programs to punish--and treat--defendants convicted of battery, road rage and disturbing the peace. Anger management classes, however, are not certified or monitored by state or local agencies. With the exception of Orange County, there are no court-approved lists of programs or guidelines on class length, curriculum or teacher qualifications. In fact, some teachers have no training at all.

"Anybody can set up a program, call it anger management and hope to get court referrals," said Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Peter Meeka. "You keep your fingers crossed and hope they are doing a good job."

Anger management classes are an offshoot of domestic violence programs, which are subject to legislative standards, including required levels of training and experience for teachers. Meeka, who spent five years presiding over a domestic violence court, said he would support statewide legislation to apply the same standards to anger management classes.

An advisory committee of the Judicial Council of California is reviewing the use of court-mandated anger management classes statewide.

Aside from the lack of standards, there are virtually no data on whether the classes actually help reduce recidivism. Because statistics are unavailable on how many people are being sentenced to anger management, authorities cannot gauge whether the programs work.

Skeptics say it's nearly impossible to change people who are angry by nature. Supporters maintain that willing participants learn useful techniques to calm themselves.

"These people are still in the terrible twos, even if they are 45 years old," said Sandra Cox, an anger management teacher and executive director of the Coalition of Mental Health Professionals in South-Central Los Angeles. "The classes give them positive ways to channel their anger rather than acting out violently."

University of Wisconsin researcher Pamela Hollenhorst, who has reviewed studies of anger management programs throughout the country, said classes help some minor offenders but do not work for most violent criminals or as the sole treatment for spousal abusers.

"Anger management is sort of a Band-Aid approach," said Hollenhorst, assistant director of the university's Institute for Legal Studies. "It doesn't address the underlying problems."

Critics cite Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as extreme examples of anger management failures. Before the teens opened fire on fellow students at Columbine High School in Colorado, they had been ordered by a court to attend anger management classes for breaking into a van and stealing electronic equipment.

### Some Judges Like the Idea

Though road, air and workplace rage are hardly new behaviors, psychologists and judges finally started identifying them as common problems in the late 1990s.

Some judges see the classes as an ideal sentence for first-time offenders convicted in bar brawls or fistfights with fellow motorists. Those judges say classes can help teach defendants how to keep their emotions in check, as well as ease crowded jails and clogged court calendars.

Defendants are typically sentenced to from 10 to 52 weekly classes as a condition of probation or as an alternative to time behind bars.

Because there are no approved lists, defendants must find their own classes, often by surfing the Internet. Probation officers keep a list of agencies that offer approved batterers' programs and might also provide anger classes.

In recent years, several celebrities who pleaded no contest to criminal charges in connection with temper flare-ups have been ordered by judges to attend anger management classes. Actress Shannen Doherty hurled a beer bottle at a car window outside a West Hollywood bar; rapper Tone Loc smashed a woman's car with a baseball bat in Los Angeles; boxer Mike Tyson struck two drivers after a traffic accident in Maryland.

"It's sort of this self-feeding frenzy," Hollenhorst said. "It gets a lot more publicity every time an athlete or a movie star gets sent to anger management."

The number of referrals further increased with a road rage law that took effect in January. The state law, written by Assemblyman Herb Wesson (D-Culver City), gives judges the authority to order defendants to complete a "court-approved anger management or 'road rage' course" in addition to suspending their driving privileges. Wesson, however, admitted recently that he was not aware that court-approved programs don't exist in most counties.

Wesson said he will talk to members of the Assembly Judiciary Committee about setting statewide standards. "If you don't have these things in place, it could lead to abuses," he said.

Los Angeles Superior Court Commissioner Roberta Kyman estimates she has sentenced more than 200 defendants to anger management classes over the last four years. She advised them to choose a class from the approved list and report back after finishing. Until late August, she didn't realize there was no such list.

#### No Standards, Many Differences

With no standards, classes differ widely in length, format and curricula. Some programs resemble therapy groups, while others teach specific skills in a classroom setting. Teachers' qualifications also vary. Some have doctorates in psychology and others do not even have a college degree.

Sharon Hartwig studied music and theater for two years at a community college and spent 1 1/2 years as a social services counselor before starting an anger management class recently at Joint Efforts Inc., a San Pedro nonprofit agency that serves low-income families.

In preparation, she attended a one-day seminar taught by a fellow teacher and wrote a manual of policies and procedures.

Some say any standards are unnecessary because many anger management teachers already lead domestic violence courses and have met the state requirements to do so.

Cox, the South-Central Los Angeles anger management teacher, insists that her clients benefit, even if it takes them a while to get the message. She said the courses also help participants lower their blood pressure or stop the progression of diabetes or heart disease.

"We know it works," said Cox, who has a doctorate in social psychology. "They block us for three to four months. Once they let that guard down, they start hearing us. And they start telling us, 'I heard your voice telling me to check my anger.'"

David Davies, a bureau chief with Los Angeles County Probation, said all his department can do is keep tabs on whether defendants attend class. They give the Probation Department certificates of completion, which the department passes along to the court.

In Orange County, probation officials took the initiative four years ago by preparing guidelines for courses and identifying teachers qualified to deal with volatile clients. The Probation Department conducts annual reviews.

The 10-week Orange County courses cost up to \$50 a week and last 90 minutes each. Instructors focus on the telltale signs of potentially violent anger: upset stomach, clenched fists, dry mouth. Then they provide tips on how students can tame their tempers.

Colorado State University psychology professor Jerry Deffenbacher, who has studied anger management, said programs work only if the participants want help. Even then, he said, the classes may help lower their anger but won't turn them into pacifists.

#### Each Week, a New Skill

On a recent Tuesday night in Brentwood, Whatley the jaywalker, Yakota the college student and Helmy the shouter sat in a circle holding their workbooks, "Gaining Control of Ourselves." Each week, George Anderson or one of his fellow teachers covers a new skill: Active listening. Identifying high-risk situations. Controlling negative emotions.

This week: Communicating effectively.

The participants took turns introducing themselves, telling why they got referred to the class and what they could have done differently to prevent getting arrested. Then they watched a video about communication styles and practiced ways to express anger and frustration without provoking a fight.

Anderson described the pretend situation: You've cooked a nice meal and your partner comes home two hours late and the food is ruined. His students' responses--though a bit formal--hit the mark: I feel hurt when you come home late for dinner because it makes me feel like you don't value our time together.

Moheb Helmy, 22, said his rage consumes him and he is constantly slamming doors, cursing and fighting with his family. "I have so much anger," he said. "I would love to change because it hurts everybody around me."

Helmy, who has been ordered by a judge to attend 12 weeks of classes, said the skills he is learning seem logical. "But when it comes time to do it, I forget it all," he said.

Anderson, a clinical social worker and former UCLA lecturer, has been teaching anger management for three years and currently has about 200 students at four Los Angeles locations. "I don't know if it works or not," he said. "But anger management teaches practical skills. I think if they come for a long period of time, they'll benefit."

Some clients come voluntarily, but most are required to attend and aren't happy about it. Inevitably, a few bring along an attitude: I don't have a problem. I don't need to be here.

Sandra Whatley, a native Texan with a self-described temper problem, had those exact feelings when she first started the class. She thought the police officer needed anger management more than she did.

But during a year of classes, Whatley said, she has realized that she has to take take some responsibility for getting arrested. Now, she leaves her workbook open on her dresser to remind her to take a deep breath when she is about to explode.

"I've had an aggressive personality my whole life," said Whatley, 40. "It's in my blood. I need this. But I cannot even begin to tell you I have toned myself down."