

Anger, a School Counsellor's Perspective

Sue Viney is the School Counsellor at the Calvin Christian Schools, Kingston, and Tasmania. Sue brings many years of teaching experience and a Master's degree in Counselling to her role working with students from Kinder to Year 12. Sue also spends time with parents, both individually or in groups, works in classes and supports staff. In this article she shares from her experience with children and adolescents struggling with issues around anger.

We would all agree that anger in all its forms has the potential to be the most destructive of all emotions. This can be a lifetime threat if appropriate ways of handling anger is never learnt and integrated. As counsellors we are presented with these young people and their families often after long, agonising years of being subjected to anger, violence and aggression. The desperation of all involved is clearly evident.

Working with anger requires a two-fold approach – proactive and reactive, I have the opportunity within a school community to do both. In trying to understand the complexities of student relationships in our school environment, it has always been apparent to me that teaching the skills for community living including the management of anger was vital from the earliest ages.

Over the last 2 years I have implemented the Stop-Think- Do Program throughout the primary schools. The program devised by Lindy Peterson and available through ACER includes an exciting teaching video; follow up activities and a wide range of other classroom material. Recently I have used the Stop-Think-Parenting book to help implement the program in families – with very positive responses.

The need to begin programs early is supported in the work of Andrew Fuller from Melbourne whose research into the area of resilience development speaks of options and consequences. These are an integral part of making behaviour choices including anger with all its possible "out" workings or "inner" workings.

In a proactive "ideal" world, as counsellors, we start with young clients and their families. We are able to help the adults with their own anger struggles, to identify, own them and help them to learn and implement strategies that will skill them to relate and parent positively. In the "real" and often reactive world, clients of whatever age, reach our doors when the anger patterns are well entrenched. The parents are well past the end of their tether and often demand that the problem be fixed without acknowledgement of the back ground or root causes that have led to the current scenario.

In God's world, we can stand firm on His word that anger is an integral part of His emotional spectrum, to be understood and handled in a way that is not destructive to themselves or those around. Paul clearly reminds us in Ephesians 4 v26, 27 "in your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold." What Words!!!! Surely the foothold of anger we see operating in the lives of clients and their families seems to be total and irreversible. The sun is forever setting on unresolved issues and the anger continues to be expressed in totally inappropriate ways. However God's VICTORY has been won for every client and we need to hang on firmly to that TRUTH as we seek, await and implement with these needy clients the wonderful Counsellor's ways.

I see anger as an onion. Right in the centre of this "onion" is the root cause(s) which may or may not be apparent to us, unknown or vehemently denied by the client or family. If it is a large onion then many layers will have been built up over the central issue(s) and it will take time to prise and soak away each one. Amongst other things the

layers may have names like shame, sadness, frustration, guilt, hurt, anxiety or embarrassment manifesting as anger. Southern Cross Educational (03 95724277) has an excellent poster available on this.

Layers of self protection, learned behaviour and responses, modelling of adults or siblings, the witnessing of violence in the family or lack of boundaries to name a few of these, build the onion to its present dimensions. To help prise the layers away we need to draw on our own belief in the client's ability to overcome the destructive behaviours. Our belief in, patience with, encouragement and willingness to engage and be with those who of themselves cannot see a way, will see our clients and their families through to a different and we pray and trust, far better place in bringing inappropriate anger responses under control.

The exploration and acquisition of language will assist clients in the description of feelings and searching for the drivers or triggers to the behaviours. Words are a powerful tool both in a positive and destructive sense. I have found that young people need our support to recognise anger in all its guises, as described previously, to help them divide the "person" from the "behaviour" and to work with both independently. The more they learn to understand who they are, their strengths and worth, the more they may gain insights into the effect of their behaviour on themselves and others.

Gaining the support of a peer or class group to give back up to a student with anger issues gives the young person a safety net around them. Staff can also provide identified safe people or safe places for the student to use as "cool down" areas, very important in a sometimes hostile and provocative school environment.

I have found that in helping confront anger, young clients respond to the personification of "Mr Angry". "He" can be conversed with, given clear instructions from the child as to the role "Mr Angry" is permitted to play in his or her life from that moment on. "Mr Angry" can be told about the damage "he" is doing. This can be accomplished through the use of an interactive dialogue concluding with often forcefully spoken directions ordering "Mr Angry" out of their lives at once and forever. As counsellor if I am role playing this, I ask the child's permission to become "Mr Angry" and am careful to derole after the child has told "me" to go (a door is useful at this point). I ask permission to re-enter the room as Mrs Viney after assuring them that "Mr Angry" has departed at their final strong statements.

Letter(s) to "Mr Angry" can also be used as an alternative to the role-play or as an adjunct to further enhance the total separation of the person and the behaviour. "He" can be checked on, given further instructions even congratulated for doing as "he" was told by staying away or giving control over the child's behaviour back to the person themselves. Parents are keen to be included in the dismissal of "Mr Angry" from the family home and relationships and if instructed in the language can play a vital role. All concerned would most certainly enjoy a celebration when "he" has finally left. I have used this approach successfully with children up to about 12 years of age and their families, but have also used aspects of this with older clients as well.

As we are all aware, the recognition of the physical manifestations of anger is very empowering, because when anger is understood through words, the drawing of pictures or any other method that gives insight, then the "battle" to bring anger under control is being brought about. Our young people need to be given the tools or better still the battle implements to have the life in all its abundance that our Lord promises, but which so often eludes them. The hope and freedom that comes with release from the control and domination of anger in the client's life will then ripple out into the lives of all those around them.