

The Angry Brain: How to Help Men With Uncontrollable Tempers

October 26, 2012 |

Over the past 30 years, I've spent nearly 25,000 hours counseling angry men, and until about two years ago, my enthusiasm was beginning to wane. If you've worked with angry male clients, you can understand why. These men are generally highly reluctant clients, who are often in your office only because they've gotten "the ultimatum" from their wives or girlfriends or bosses or sometimes court judges: "Get therapy for your anger or get out / you're fired / you'll go to jail." Many, considered by everyone who knows them to have an "anger problem," arrive in your office convinced that they don't have an anger problem: the *real* problem is their stupid coworkers, annoying girlfriends, demanding spouses, spoiled kids, or unfair probation officers. However, they arrive at your office with a shotgun at their backs, so to speak, and know they have no choice. They hate the entire situation because it makes them feel powerless.

No wonder they feel powerless: they're being coerced to lay down their anger, the only weapon they've ever had against feelings of powerlessness. They often trace their reliance upon anger to a childhood history of danger, trauma, shaming, and pain. Anger is the emotion they can trust, the one that might keep danger at bay. As they grew up, they continued to use anger to make people they regard as dangerous back away. By the time you see them, they regard just about every person in their lives as "dangerous," including loved ones. These men have become habitually angry. I liken their condition to the default option on a computer: their anger goes on automatically unless they consciously turn it off.

Of course, it isn't easy to turn off the default option when the way to do so is hidden deep within the machine's (our brain's) control panel. Furthermore, men for whom anger is a default emotional response to life's vicissitudes are often relatively untrained in experiencing and communicating other emotions. For example, one of my clients "went off"--screaming and threatening bodily harm against his father's doctors--when his father died, to the point the police had to be summoned, because he couldn't handle his grief.

Anger was the only emotion he could call upon in time of need. Not surprisingly, when these men come to therapy, whether as individuals or in couples or groups, they're frequently defensive, argumentative, passive-aggressive, protective of their right to be angry, and doubtful about my competence to understand or help them in any way.

It'd be misleading to say that my most difficult clients are unmotivated. More accurately, they're antimotivated, committed to undermining any behavioral programs or specific anger management tactics I offer. Meaningful change takes many repetitions: "Practice, practice, practice" is a hallmark of anger-management training. For example, taking the time to put a problem into perspective ("On a 1-10 point scale, Joe, how important is it for your teenage daughter to get home every night by 8 p.m.?") works well, but only if the client is motivated enough to practice putting things into proper perspective perhaps as often as several times a day. It stands to reason that trying to argue such men out of their commitment to anger is pointless. I long ago realized I couldn't beat them in face-to-face combat; they're better at in-your-face challenges and making contemptuous remarks than I'll ever be. I needed a tool that allowed me to sidestep their oppositionality and create a therapeutic alliance.

At a deeper level, chronically angry people have become lifelong victims of what's sometimes called negative neuroplasticity. They've unintentionally trained their brains so well, through countless repetitions of undesired behavior (at least, undesired by the rest of the world), that they're primed to think, feel, and say things that increase their own anger. For example, Joe may well think that if his daughter gets home after 8 p.m. it means she's probably having sex with some male punk. That kind of thought pattern is automatic.

So now we have two major concerns. First, some of my clients enter treatment antimotivated. Second, their brains have been programmed to react automatically with anger and hostility to a wide variety of situations. What kind of therapeutic intervention can address these issues?

Focusing on the Brain to Increase Motivation

About six years ago, I stumbled across the answer when I attended a session about the brain at the Networker Symposium in Washington, D.C. The controversial brain researcher Daniel Amen was just beginning his lecture when he mentioned in passing that he'd been browsing through the books on anger in the sales area. "None of them said anything about the brain," he noted somewhat dismissively. Now many of those anger books he was trashing were *my* books, so at first I was defensive. But by the end of the talk,

I realized he was right, at least about the books I'd authored. I hadn't mentioned anything about brain processes for a simple reason: I didn't know anything about them. That led me to immerse myself in the subject of the brain, and as I did so, my enthusiasm for working with angry clients increased exponentially. How can learning about the brain--particularly the angry brain and how it got that way--possibly influence clients who have a hard time taking in therapy or sticking with anger-management techniques? Aren't concepts drawn from brain research simply too abstruse, too abstract, and apparently unrelated to daily life to make much difference to them? In fact, what I've found is just the reverse: these men are fascinated by information about how anger develops in the brain and why it's so hard to control, and they consider it far more relevant to their lives than many standard therapy concepts. Getting to understand a bit of what happens "inside their heads" when they get angry resonates deeply with them. In one way, they can cling to their defensiveness and denial systems, since they certainly can't be accused of deliberately messing up their minds. Sidestepping their defensiveness and emphasizing their opportunity to do something right that will retrain their brains gives them a positive direction and a possible source for well-earned personal pride. Furthermore, hearing me explain how, by regular, committed behavioral practice of various anger-management techniques, they can literally change their own brain circuits, stimulates both hope that they can change and desire to begin. For the first time in their lives, they feel they might be capable of literally *using* their own brains to *change* their brains. It is a real revelation to many angry men. My own enthusiasm for brain science and my belief in angry men's inherent capacity to reorganize their own neural circuitry are probably another key to revving up their motivation to try. My "brain talk" to them isn't just a lecture about applied neurophysiology, but in truth a kind of triggering mechanism arousing their own curiosity and interest. Clearly, my enthusiasm evokes--in their brains--a mirroring enthusiasm for this process. It may well be that my sheer enthusiasm for this endeavor, my joy and excitement about the brain, triggers left-hemisphere mirror neuronal activity that bypasses right-hemisphere negativity and cynicism.

A Man with an Angry Brain

Devron Johnson is a 40-year-old male who's been divorced for 10 years, partly because of his anger problems. An intelligent but not highly educated man, he works as a heating and cooling technician. He has two adolescent sons, with whom he barely converses and seldom visits. He's now in a new relationship with Sheila, a 36-year-old mother of three younger children who live with them. Although Devron has never been physically violent with the children, he often frightens them with his angry outbursts. This man grew up in a tough part of Detroit, where survival was the name of the game. His parents separated and reconnected several times during his childhood. The family atmosphere was markedly hostile--full of negativity, accusations, and occasional violence. Devron said he hated his father because he was never there for him, not even when he became a star athlete on his high school's baseball team. Devron sought therapy because Sheila had threatened to end their relationship unless he became much nicer to her kids. He added that he was also in trouble at work because "I gave the finger to my boss once too often."

Here's how Devron described his anger: "Man, I had a bad attitude in school. I beat people up if they looked at me wrong. But I gave that up. I don't hit nobody anymore. But Sheila says I still have a bad attitude. She says I look for problems with her kids. Then I blow because I have a really short fuse. And I have a hard time letting go of my anger, too. Once I get pissed at someone, they stay my enemy forever." Still, Devron does want to change. He loves Sheila and even grudgingly admits he likes her children. He doesn't want to lose them. However, he doubts whether I, or anybody else, can help him. A few years ago, he attended an anger-management program for about 10 weeks, but says, "I didn't get nothing useful from it."

Forging an Alliance

Like many angry clients, Devron came to counseling under duress--the "get help, or get out" final call. This isn't a formula for success, since such clients often arrive for counseling thinking that they'll more or less passively go through the motions to get the wife/boss/law off their backs, and then they'll be free to revert to previous behavior. By contrast, Devron was directly skeptical and dismissive--derisive, in fact. Instead of pretending to buy the package, he openly challenged me to prove I had something new to offer. It's uncomfortable to be sneered at by your client, but I've learned to recognize an open challenge as a positive indicator for success. Devron's disdain was a sign of energy that might be used in counseling, if I could develop an alliance with him.

"Actually, Devron, I do have something to offer you that you probably haven't run into before," I told him, "I can help you change your brain." I proceeded to explain with the enthusiasm and energy I usually feel

when talking about the brain that he was actually capable of making fundamental, long-term changes in the way he thinks. "Devron, all it takes is commitment and persistence. I know you're capable of both of those things because you've told me how much you love Sheila and the kids--that's commitment--and how you've stuck it out with them when it would have been easier to walk away--that's persistence." I emphasized to him that he'd developed lifelong habits of anger that had become deeply rooted in his brain. But I assured him that he and he alone could make changes in those habits if he so desired. However, I cautioned him that real brain change doesn't come easy. I said he'd need to make a strong commitment to practice new behavior for at least several months, so he could build, improve, and expand new circuitry inside his brain while reducing the power of his negative brain circuits. I briefly mentioned such concepts as neuroplasticity and myelination, but only as a tactical move, to assure him that I did, in fact, know what I was talking about. I told him I didn't just *believe* this brain stuff might work, I was absolutely convinced because I've seen many other angry people change their brains in just this way, and because I myself had changed my brain to become much more optimistic and generous.

As I spoke, I watched Devron's "show me" expression change to hope and wonder. "You mean I can really change the way I think?" he asked. It turned out that Devron's oppositionality obscured a deep sense of pessimism and hopelessness. He'd believed that change was impossible, in effect dooming him to a lifelong anger career. But now, maybe because of my own sense of conviction, he began to see possibilities. We talked a little more before the hour ended, and I asked him to think about how much he wanted to change his brain and in which ways. I also asked him what positive goals he wanted to pursue--for example, what other emotions he might be willing to experience if his brain wasn't dominated by anger. A positive goal is important with all clients, of course, but especially with angry clients, who often mistakenly set only the negative goal of being less angry. I explained to Devron that only setting a negative goal like quitting being angry was like deciding that a car that currently could only go in reverse would be just fine if you could get it to stay in neutral. The idea is to move forward in life, to get that car moving ahead. Of course this same idea applies to only quitting drinking (instead of leading a sober lifestyle) or stopping being critical (instead of giving praise).

Finally, I cautioned Devron again that real brain change doesn't come easy. I told him he'd need to make a strong commitment to practice new behavior for at least several months so he could build, improve, and expand new circuitry inside his brain while reducing the power of his negative brain circuits. I then sent him home with two pages of examples of possible brain change plans he could implement. One example was converting criticism and pessimism to praise and optimism. Another was to convert resentment into forgiveness. A third was to look for the good in people (and himself) instead of the bad.

When Devron returned a week later, he said he'd thought a lot about changing his brain and his life. He'd discussed it with Sheila, who'd told him she'd stick around for a while if she saw him really working to change his behavior. Now he was eager to make a six-month commitment to brain change. I then gave him some handouts I've created to help him name his brain-change plan. A person with a good brain plan has given it a name that means something at an emotional level, includes specific initial behaviors to maximize the opportunity for immediate success, and at least speculates about longer-term improvements and additions, and how achieving these changes might affect him or her. I also gave Devron the chapter on neuroplastic change from my book to reinforce the idea that changing his brain was realistic, if and only if he'd make a strong commitment to it.

Devron's Brain-Change Plan.

Devron returned the next week in a quandary. He told me that he and Sheila had had a big disagreement about what his brain-change plan should include. She wanted him to be nicer to her children. Devron told me that he wanted to be nicer to them, but that his first concern was quitting thinking so pessimistically about the world. "If I can't quit thinking that everyone is out to screw me over, I don't think my changes will last," he said. I thought Devron had hit upon a clear understanding of how he needed to change at an existential level. Brain-change plans aren't simple behavioral alterations: they really change your brain, and in doing so, ultimately affect your connections with yourself, those you love, and the universe. So I affirmed Devron's insight. However, I did point out that his goal and Sheila's weren't contradictory. Being nicer to the kids could well become one way that he altered his mindset of hostility and suspiciousness.

After all, deeply held beliefs don't change completely on their own. Devron needed to try out new behavior and receive positive rewards for doing so in order to give his brain the opportunity to be transformed.

I'd like to offer a side comment here. We often expect our angry clients to act as if they were living in a safe world, a world in which people are pleasant, trustworthy, loving, and consistent. This false belief on our part sets clients up to fail. Devron's siblings, for instance, regularly engaged in felonious behaviors,

such as drug dealing and robbery, and expected him to join them as he often had in the past. He told me during therapy that he'd begun declining these invitations. When I asked him if he'd practiced being assertive with them, he laughed. "I guess if telling my brother to go to hell when he attacked me for not going along with some scam he was into, then yes, I was very assertive." The result of his new "good" behavior was that his family ostracized him for several months. Fortunately though, Sheila and her children were dependably in his corner, so that Devron could practice new, prosocial behavior around them without being criticized or ridiculed.

Devron named his plan "Learning to Trust." I was tempted to add "and take in love," but Devron would have labeled that phrase unmanly. When I asked him how he planned to begin this plan, he suggested he could go to his father to see if he could learn to trust the man he most distrusted in the world. Needless to say, this was a palpably rotten idea: in all likelihood, his father would once again have demonstrated his complete untrustworthiness, potentially undermining everything Devron was trying to do. I talked him out of it with some difficulty by pointing out that he was betting his whole stake on one roll of the dice. "Besides, it's a bad bet," I said. "You'd be better off investing in a smaller stake, like letting yourself trust Sheila more." That reminded him of his real priorities.

He decided to open up emotionally a little more to both his family and a few trusted coworkers. For example, he told some of his history to two of his coworkers, the ones he felt most comfortable with, and they responded positively with their own self-disclosures. Then he took a bigger chance by admitting to Sheila that he had cheated on his first wife. Much to his shock, she told him she'd known about it for a long time--his ex-wife had thoughtfully given Sheila that information when she'd begun dating Devron--but she'd chosen not to mention it and trust that he'd be faithful to her.

Sheila's disclosure and assertion of trust brought him to tears. At that very moment, his brain-change plan spontaneously expanded to include being trustworthy to others. Since Devron had a long history of lying by omission ("Oh, I must have forgotten to tell you that") this expansion was quite significant. It had proved harder for him than the initial goal because he'd had to retrain himself not to leave out some of the truth "so nobody could pin me down." He kept expanding from his core commitment to develop trust. He realized along the way that he'd been mean to Sheila's children because he didn't want to get close to them and then lose them. But Sheila came through by rewarding his obvious changes with reassurance that she'd stay with him.

I regularly review a client's brain-change plan with him or her, rather than just assume it's working fine. It's important to challenge clients quickly if they're letting their plan drift.

The final addition to Devron's plan was learning how to be more empathetic. Devron acknowledged that empathy was strange territory for him: "Frankly, I never gave a damn what anybody else felt." But now that he felt safer, he could do what safe people do: care about and take a real interest in others. Like many angry people, he has some difficulty being empathic. Empathy partly depends on automatic attunement processes usually learned in infancy through parent--infant synchronic movement. He experienced few such experiences as a child. We talked together about this deficit, a deficit he was determined to challenge. He immediately made a real effort to put himself in the shoes of others. It's just that he had trouble first taking off his own shoes. For instance, he told his 12-year-old daughter, Amy, who was being teased by classmates, that he knew exactly how she felt, even though he'd been the bully, not the victim, when he'd been in school. But here again, the principles of neuroplasticity apply. Devron realized he'd misunderstood the situation when his daughter got mad at his reply. He then consciously took the time to listen better. Gradually, this behavior was becoming faster, smoother, and more automatic.

Devron's plan, then, began with developing some basic trust in the world, which led to being trustworthy himself, which morphed into increased empathy and actually caring about others. He quit working with me after approximately nine months. Our last session included Sheila, who affirmed that Devron had become much less angry, more caring, and far more present in their lives. She'd previously doubted his changes would endure, "But he's only becoming nicer," she admitted. "I don't doubt him any longer." Devron added that he now felt deep inside his soul that he could trust Sheila. He felt safe in a relationship for the first time in his life. "So now I have no reason to be mad all the time." Of course, he and Sheila still argue from time to time, as do almost all couples. But Devron controls his initial burst of anger far better than before, calms down quicker, and lets go of his anger sooner.