

Rethinking Anger

The Bioenergetic Therapy Approach

Laurie Ure



When the graphic video of George Floyd's murder at the hands of police began circulating, people around the world responded with shock and outrage. In the widespread protests that followed, Americans expressed their collective anger about police violence and the systemic racism that perpetuates it. Although work still needs to be

done to overhaul the way police treat people of color, we're already starting to see that this anger, when channeled into action and calls for justice and reform, generates positive changes that benefit everyone.

The public mobilization that followed Floyd's murder shows the good that can come from anger. But too often, therapists working with anger focus on controlling and preventing it, rather than finding constructive ways to use it. Instead, clients who express anger are commonly labeled as dysregulated, and treatment focuses on tamping it down. This speaks to a bigger problem: as a society, we chronically repress our anger.

Bioenergetic therapy, a psychodynamic, integrated body-mind approach, regards anger differently, providing tools that can help clients access and express anger in safe ways. Bioenergetics got its start in the 1950s, its founders working under the notion that childhood trauma causes us to develop psychological defenses that, while necessary for the child's survival, can also burden us as adults if left unchecked. These defenses manifest physically in muscular tension which contributes to a multitude of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and phobias. While bioenergetic approaches and techniques have evolved over time, the principles remain the same: there's a clear connection between the mind and body. Energy held in the body by chronic tension leads to negative thoughts and blocked feelings that impedes our well-being.

Anger is one of these energy states. But bioenergetic therapists like myself regard it as a natural response to being harmed. Getting angry is a person's way of showing that a boundary has been violated or that we've lost something dear to us. Anger can give us the energy to speak up or take action to change a bad situation. It can inspire a person to express or assert themselves in ways they might not have otherwise. Sometimes, it's a

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cover for tender feelings like sadness or fear. The bioenergetic therapist's task is to provide opportunities for clients to explore how they express and contain anger, as well as how they might use it more effectively in their lives.

Some of the clients I treat were taught at an early age that expressing anger is bad or unsafe. Regardless of why they feel uncomfortable expressing anger, when a client can't do so, I've found they often lose the ability to make changes in their lives, to live with agency. They might resign themselves to chronic boundary violations from spouses, children, coworkers, bosses, parents, and friends, which can perpetuate low self-esteem and hopelessness. Generally speaking, displays of anger are viewed as maladaptive. That's been especially problematic for oppressed groups and people of color, who may be rightfully angry about their treatment but are viewed as dangerous, scary, or out of control if they express that anger.

Research shows that chronically suppressing anger contributes to a variety of health problems, including constipation, headaches, and high blood pressure. It also often underlies conditions like depression and anxiety, or behaviors like substance abuse.

As a bioenergetic therapist, I help clients identify the possible sources of their anger, as well as the different ways it's being expressed. Some anger is subtle and quiet; some is explosive; and some is in response to circumstances we can't change, like the losses many of us have experienced since the coronavirus. I help my clients clarify what kind of anger is most appropriate in different situations. For example, changing government policy might call for an anger that simmers beneath the surface, like peaceful protest, fueling the persistence necessary to create change. Other times, like when dealing with a crying child, it *can* be wise to contain anger to have the most impact.

I help clients become aware of the tense muscles in their bodies inhibiting the release of anger. We do exercises that allow them to explore the tension in their body, release it, and experience anger fully without harming themselves or others. Like many bioenergetic therapists, I use tools in session like towels, bats and rackets, and large pillows and cushions. A towel often comes in handy for twisting. A mattress gives people the opportunity to lie down and kick. I invite clients who are timid about expressing their angry emotions a space to experience them full-bodied, a way of becoming less afraid of expressing them. These are healthy ways of channeling anger that allow the client to move forward.

Indeed, there's value to helping clients express anger physically, rather than just talking about it. I compare it to going for a walk as opposed to *just talking* about going for a walk. My clients have told me that when they do this work, they can feel the sensation of anger moving through their body. They can feel the muscles that have held back their ability to express it—and discover new, healthy ways to let it move through them. Some clients say they were never fully aware that there are physical sensations alerting them to issues that need to be addressed. With clients for whom this is a new experience, we work gradually, using grounding exercises like pressing the legs or feet into the floor or a soft cushion, which helps clients center themselves.

One exercise I've found particularly effective is encouraging clients to associate words with a physical sensation. I encourage them to use words and phrases that match what they feel on the inside, like "No!" or "Stop it!" or "No more!" When we incorporate punching, kicking, or squeezing towels or cushions, I ask them to adjust the tone of their voice or search for words that *really* reflect the energy of their physical movements, which creates an integrated mind-body experience.

Almost all my clients report feeling calmer and more relaxed after doing these exercises. I often hear words like *freer* or *stronger* after sessions. Like the analogy of going for a walk, the client has put their body to work and can now relax. And if there's still anger lingering, being in this relaxed state allows them to process it more easily and confidently.

This work can generate significant changes in clients' lives. They might stand up to a partner who previously treated them poorly, stop letting a coworker take advantage of them, or find their depression has lifted a little. Many report feeling like they have more constructive energy.

In cases where the client has experienced a trauma, assault, or similar violation, there's sometimes a tendency to feel shame or self-blame. This anger directed at the self can be crippling. Therapists who specialize in bioenergetic therapy are taught to help clients explore their history, especially early childhood, to help them understand the influences shaping their present-day responses. The goal afterward, once again, is to help them redirect that anger outward in a contained space, assuring them that they're not to blame.

Some clients are initially hesitant to do bioenergetic exercises to work with their anger, saying things like, "I'm not a violent person" or "I'm afraid my anger might hurt someone." Other times, they worry it could turn them into the person responsible for the anger they're feeling. However, with gentle encouragement and a reminder that hitting a pillow or

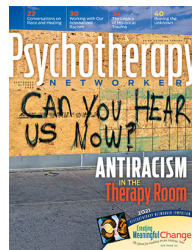
yelling in the safety of the therapist's office isn't hurting themselves or anyone else, they usually warm up to them, realizing that anger *can* be safely expressed. Clients may need to repeat these exercises several times for them to have a therapeutic benefit. But over time, I've found most of my clients develop fewer angry outbursts and live calmer, happier lives. They learn to stop using the body's energy to control pent-up anger and redirect it toward enjoying life.

Using physical exercises in therapy is just one of many mind-body tools employed by bioenergetic therapists. As with any therapy, there's a variety of deep work to be done, including helping clients explore the impact of early experiences and developing a strong therapeutic alliance. But as the little and big traumas in our lives right now continue to make us angry and hungry for change, the principles of bioenergetic therapy can offer us a way forward.

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Thursday, October 1, 2020 7:07:54 PM | posted by Ana Zebel

Excellent! Thank you Laurie!!!