

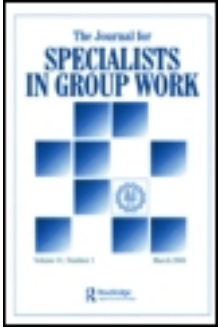
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### Women and anger: A structured group

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# WOMEN AND ANGER: A STRUCTURED GROUP

Cindy L. Juntunen  
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*A structured group designed to consider anger and its impact on women's lives is presented, including a facilitator's manual. Suggestions for future groups are provided.*

Anger is an issue with which many women have difficulty. This is not surprising, because, as a number of authors point out, our culture socializes women to be emotional but not to be angry (Ganley, 1988; Laidlaw, 1990; Matlin, 1987). Girls receive the message during childhood that "anger (or at least its expression) is forbidden to us if we are to become successfully feminine" (Laidlaw, 1990, pp. 20-21). Thus, women come to fear that if they express anger they will be seen as "bitchy" (Rosewater, 1988), and for many women, a self-image that includes anger seems "abnormal or grotesque" (Burtle, 1985, p. 75). Consequently, women who do express anger often believe that they do so inappropriately. Some women report that they are too angry, explosive, or that they feel out of control when they are angry. In contrast, other women are unable to ac-

knowledge that they ever feel angry, or that they would ever have any reason to feel angry. Lerner (1988) stated that "women tend to be overly inhibited . . . in the direct expression of anger and aggression" (p. 51). This inhibition may cause women to suppress, ignore, and deny their anger. If anger is expressed, it may be done ineffectively and destructively, after a period of suppression. This results in a fear of anger, which leads to further suppression and denial.

Feminist theorists have explored the role of anger in the lives of women for at least the past two decades. Within the feminist therapy literature, numerous writers have emphasized the importance of therapists attending to issues surrounding anger when working with women clients (Burtle, 1985; Greenspan, 1983; Laidlaw, 1990; Lerner, 1985, 1988; Rawlings & Carter, 1977; Rosewater, 1988; Sturdivant, 1980). Feminists (e.g., Rawlings & Graham, 1988; Williams, 1976) have pointed out that one consequence of suppressing anger is often depression, which "serves to bind anger and obscure its sources, allowing . . . women to deny . . . difficulties entirely and maintain a single minded focus on the question 'What's wrong with me?'" (Lerner, 1988, p. 203). Gilbert (1980) expressed a central theme in feminist thought, noting that experiencing and expressing anger is "essential to the establishment of women's personal power" (p. 259).

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Group therapy is regarded as a particularly effective approach for exploring patterns of anger or anger's repression (Rutan & Stone, 1984; Yalom, 1985). For various reasons, group therapy is also viewed as an effective mode of therapy for women in single-sex groups (Gottlieb, Burden, McCormick, & Nicarity, 1983; Walker, 1987). Women's perspectives and concerns may be validated, and many women may learn to value themselves and other women as a result of membership in a women's group (Butler, 1985; Grenard-Moore & Vasquez, 1990; Sturdivant, 1980). Unfortunately, few reports of anger and group therapy for women have been published. A literature search revealed only one report dealing with group therapy regarding anger for women in the general population (Hotelling & Reese, 1983). Other work on anger and group therapy focused on controlling aggressive behavior among male college students (Rimm, Hill, Brown, & Stuart, 1974), children (Barfield & Hutchinson, 1989; Raynor, 1992), Vietnam veterans (McWhirter & Liebman, 1988), prison populations (Rokach, 1987; Wilfley, Rodon, & Anderson, 1986), spouse and child batterers (Deschner & McNeil, 1986) and adult clients with poor anger control (McKay, 1992). Of these articles, only one (McWhirter & Liebman, 1988) also addressed maladaptive suppression of anger and only one (Wilfley et al., 1986) focused on women. Hotelling and Reese encouraged a nonstructured approach to groups for women and anger. McKay outlined a structured approach, purportedly for the general population, but which did not address the specific concerns of women. No articles about structured groups for addressing difficulties women may have in experiencing, understanding, or expressing anger were found.

On the basis of the literature on women's anger and on group therapy previously cited, we believe that additional attention to this issue in a structured group format could prove beneficial to clients. Because

of the lack of available literature on structured groups for women and anger, we (Juntunen and Cohen, supervised by Wolszon) developed and conducted a structured therapy group for women that examined anger and its impact on women's lives. In this article, we describe the process of planning and implementing a women and anger group, present a facilitator's manual for therapists who would like to conduct such a group, and conclude with an evaluation of the group.

## DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

### Theoretical Framework

The Women and Anger (WAA) group was developed to help women understand and acknowledge the role anger plays in our lives, and to develop broader choices for how to express anger. The feminist perspective of the group leaders was integral to this focus. The basis for the group was the hypothesis of Gilbert (1980) and other authors cited that owning anger is, for women, essential to establishing personal power. Group sessions focused on the acceptance of anger as a valuable emotion. We believed this focus would foster greater feelings of power and control among group members, many of whom described their experience of anger as being "out of control."

The WAA group was conceived as a short-term, structured, theme group (i.e., a therapy group that focuses on a particular problem or theme). Drum and Lawler (as cited in Drum, 1990) described four therapeutic factors that theme groups should use to be effective: (a) creating a therapeutic environment, (b) managing the interpersonal group process, (c) focusing on the intrapersonal aspects of the identified problem (in this case, anger), and (d) providing structuring procedures. We discuss the application of these factors more fully later in the article. Drum and Lawler discouraged the use of a completely un-

structured process group approach in favor of a more structured modality for theme groups, in contrast to the unstructured approach to a women and anger group advocated by Hotelling and Reese (1983). Indeed, feminist theorist Jo Freeman (1973) argued that structurelessness could really never be achieved, that, in fact, all groups have structure. However, within a so-called structureless group, that structure is implicit, rather than explicit; thus power is also implicitly rather than explicitly distributed. The acknowledgment of power is central to our own feminist approach to psychotherapy. We wanted to expressly acknowledge the power present in the group leaders, so that each member would have equal access to group resources. Therefore we chose a structured approach in which group goals and objectives were made explicit. This format also allowed for greater inclusion of psychoeducational experiences, which permitted sharing important, beneficial information that would not necessarily arise spontaneously in an unstructured process group. However, we included enough flexibility within the structure to allow time to process interpersonal issues and other issues that might arise unexpectedly.

### Goals of a Women and Anger Group

Most mental health professionals who address clients' anger deal solely or primarily with anger management. However, from a feminist perspective, we agree that anger management is important but emphasize that it must be presented within a therapeutic context "whereby the woman client is enabled to look at her experience of anger, accept it without guilt or loss of self-respect, and eventually learn to express it or use it in (healthy) ways" (Burtle, 1985, p. 74). In addition to these goals for an individual treatment approach for anger therapy with women, Burtle (1985) also suggested "clearing the way for considered action," (p. 77) which involves ex-

amining values and the meanings of power. These goals seemed well suited for a group format as well, so we adapted and expanded upon them for the WAA group.

A central goal of the WAA group was to help women learn to identify their anger. Clinical experience and feminist theory suggest that unacknowledged anger is a primary difficulty for some women. Anger may be internalized or turned against the self, resulting in depression and low self-esteem. Indeed, many women indicate that they do not realize they are angry until they "blow up," which often leads to feelings of regret and shame as well as disruption of relationships. Therefore, this group teaches women to recognize the presence of anger, including degrees of anger, using physiological and emotional cues, and to distinguish the difference between angry feelings and behaviors associated with anger. The latter is important because of the equation made by many laypersons of angry emotions with physically or verbally aggressive behaviors, which are negatively sanctioned for women. This leads many women to deny experiencing anger at all. WAA group members were expected to learn that aggressive behavior was by no means the only way to express anger (Thomas, 1993).

A second goal of this group was to help women acknowledge and accept that anger is a normal human emotion that plays a role in every person's life. Because of their gender role conditioning, even women who are aware of their angry feelings may consciously try to suppress them or avoid expressing them because they do not believe they have the right to be angry, or they believe that being angry is bad or inappropriate. Suppression of anger can be "a huge block to . . . (use of) power in positive, self-affirming ways" (Kasl, 1992, p. 82).

A closely related goal was to go beyond recognizing the universality of anger to recognition of the positive benefits of anger. For instance, anger may be an important indication that one is being vio-

lated or harmed in some way, and it may be used as a tool of strength and empowerment to increase energy and promote societal change (Kasl, 1992). The WAA group provided opportunities to explore such advantages.

Additional goals for the WAA group included encouraging clients to critically consider the sociopolitical contexts of womens' lives. One aspect of this is gender role analysis (Rawlings & Carter, 1977); this may help women gain understanding of why anger is such a problematic emotion. Group members were also asked to consider other external social forces that directly affected their lives as women, often in an adverse manner (e.g., sexual violence against women and various forms of sexism) and which are good reasons to make someone angry. "Acknowledging anger and finding viable means of correcting inequity are the basis of feminist empowerment" (Rosewater, 1988, p. 143). Thus, group members explored how they could act as agents of social change and possibly apply their new awareness of anger and power in the communities in which they live.

The final goal for this group was to provide instruction and allow members to practice healthy ways to deal with and express anger. Thomas (1993) identified four modes of anger expression: anger-in (suppression), anger-out (aggression), anger-discuss (rational discussion of the incident with a supportive listener), and physiological anger symptoms (e.g., headaches). Research on women and anger by Thomas and her colleagues found that "(s)elf-esteem was positively associated with a tendency to discuss anger in a nonblaming way. Lower self-esteem was related to both venting anger and keeping it in" (Saylor & Denham, 1993, p. 101). Therapeutic use of techniques for clients to learn to assertively direct angry energy are advocated by many experts (e.g., McKay, 1992; Rawlings & Graham, 1988; Tavris, 1982). Thus, the design of the WAA group included much time for role play

for group members to learn and practice new skills.

Each of these goals was addressed in a variety of ways during the course of this group. We provide specific discussion topics and activities used to meet these goals in the facilitator's manual section.

### Planning and Implementation of the Women and Anger Group

The WAA group ran for 8 weeks, meeting each week for a session of 1½ hours. It was facilitated by two female therapists for two reasons: first, we could provide role models of women who were comfortable with anger; second, we could model methods for dealing with conflict if it arose. Using Yalom's (1985) guidelines for group size, we sought a group size of 6 to 8.

Once the focus and structure of the group were established, the group was advertised on a college campus, seeking self-referred participants. It was also described to staff members of the campus counseling center, who were asked to refer clients being seen individually who might benefit from the WAA group. Upon referral, individual screening interviews for potential members were conducted (see Facilitator's Manual for instructions for these interviews). Women who demonstrated a willingness to consider the impact of anger in their lives were considered appropriate for this group. This included two distinct types of members: (a) those who could readily identify anger as contributing to interpersonal difficulties, and (b) those who reported having few or no feelings of anger but had been referred by individual counselors and were willing to consider the possibility that anger might be an issue. We believed that these differences might allow the women to learn about anger in a different way as a result of sharing with each other, and so viewed the two distinct groups as appropriate for the WAA group.

After the screening interview process, a group of 8 women, ranging in age from

19 to 53, was identified. Three of the women identified anger as having a direct negative impact on their relationships. They referred to their anger as explosive, problematic, and out of control. The women reported "never" or "hardly ever" being angry and were uncomfortable thinking about themselves as "having anger." However, they were willing to explore the issue further, largely as a result of their work in individual counseling. All of the women identified anger as being somehow frightening or threatening.

Given this group composition, Drum and Lawler's four therapeutic factors (Drum, 1990) presented earlier were applied in several ways. First, because anger was a threatening or frightening emotion for the women in the group, establishing a safe therapeutic environment was crucial. Building trust and providing encouragement were necessary to establish a working environment. Second, the interpersonal group process had to be carefully monitored because we were working with a substantial emotional issue in a time-limited frame. Interpersonal conflict was addressed immediately through feedback and group processing. To focus on the intrapersonal aspects of working with anger, we used a combination of interventions designed to provide problem-solving strategies for group members. We designed a variety of interventions so that each group member would benefit from at least some of them. Finally, we sought to create change in a fairly limited amount of time. Therefore, we used several structuring procedures within each group session and throughout the 8 weeks of the group. These included sequencing interventions (i.e., planning their order so that they would build on each other) and setting a pace for change.

### **Facilitator's Manual for a Women and Anger Group**

Following a description of the prescreening interviews is the outline of activities

for the Women and Anger group. Each session includes didactic information, structured exercises, and open-ended sharing. Because groups vary in terms of the energy and activity level of participants, there may not be time in every session for every activity. Therefore, facilitators are encouraged to be flexible in accordance with the unique process of every group.

### **Prescreening Interviews**

We recommend that the facilitators meet with each potential group member for individual interviews of 30 to 45 minutes. In these interviews, the facilitators introduce themselves, briefly explain the anticipated group process, and ask the following questions: (a) What about this group interests you? (b) What would you like to get out of the group? (c) What past experiences have you had with anger that are important? (d) Are you currently receiving any other type of counseling? (e) Have you done group work in the past? If yes, what type(s)? and (f) Have you received individual counseling in the past? The first two questions are used for screening. Women who indicate that they want to further explore anger and develop ways to deal with it effectively are appropriate for the group. Women who indicate that they want to remove anger from their lives or learn to control it to the extent of dismissing it should not be considered appropriate, because this group approach will not support their goals. The remaining questions about past experiences provide facilitators with some baseline information about the group members to aid in selection and composition of the group; they are not used specifically for decisions about participation. The potential member is then given time to ask questions. Finally, the facilitators explain "next steps" (e.g., when and how she will be notified if she is selected to participate in the group, when and where the group will be meeting).

## Session 1: Introductions, Ground Rules, Meaning of Anger in Our Lives

*Content goals.* Participants will begin to clarify how anger has been problematic in their lives, envision how they would like anger to play a more constructive role in their lives, and set goals for how they would like to make these changes.

*Process goals.* Participants and facilitators will start to get to know each other. Group norms promoting safety, trust, support, and self-disclosure will be explicitly established.

*Instructions.* Each participant and facilitator introduces herself and describes what brought her to the group. Then, group guidelines are written on a flip chart, discussed, and agreed on. Participants are given first opportunity to suggest guidelines that would contribute to a safe environment for risk and growth and, if they run out of ideas, the facilitators propose additional guidelines. Because perceptions differ regarding the meaning of some of the guidelines, the facilitators assist the participants with clarifying their perceptions and reaching a consensus about how to operationally define (i.e., put into practice) the guidelines.

Some discussion of this process is necessary. We agree with Yalom (1985) that "the ideal therapy group has norms that permit the therapeutic factors to operate with maximum effectiveness" (p. 118). However, we disagree that these norms should evolve and function ultimately as "a set of unwritten rules" (p. 118). This is consistent with arguments for structure proposed by Freeman (1973), as well as other feminist authors. As feminists developed new group forms for women in the consciousness-raising (CR) groups of the 1960s and 1970s, many CR groups found that setting explicit rules for group process fostered the development of cooperation and affiliation (Kirsch, 1987; Walker, 1987). Thus, we think it best to use a process of

consensus to establish guidelines from the beginning. The ground rules considered and adopted for WAA included confidentiality, respect, a nonjudgmental stance, attendance, active participation, and setting limits on contact outside of the group.

After introductions and guidelines, some time is spent in large group discussion of the personal meaning of anger for each of the participants. Questions useful for sparking discussion include the following: What does anger mean to you? How have you experienced anger in your life? What messages have you learned in your culture and in your family about anger and women? When have the consequences of anger been positive? When have these consequences been negative?

Discussion continues in pairs or small groups for self-assessment and goal setting. Group members are asked to consider how anger has been problematic in their lives by discussing times they have been angry and did not like how they handled their anger. Each person takes a turn expressing a goal or goals for the WAA group. To assist with this process, the facilitators may ask the following: How would you like to change this? How do you imagine anger playing a positive role in your life?

*Homework assignment.* After the discussion, clients are asked to complete a homework assignment in which they write a paper of no more than one page in which they (a) state their goal(s) for the WAA group and (b) describe any anger experience that seems relevant to them from the week: The facilitators encourage group members to keep all WAA materials in a folder or a binder for the duration of the group sessions.

## Session 2: Identifying Anger

*Content goals.* Participants will learn to distinguish anger from aggression, anger from other emotions, and different levels of anger.

*Process goals.* Participants will have opportunities to learn new information

through a variety of modalities; to experience and express different feelings; and continue to experience safety and support, which come from adherence to group norms.

*Instructions.* Group members check in by completing the sentence, "During the past week, I felt angry when . . ." and by sharing any additional goals for the group that they had thought of since the last meeting.

A brief lecture by facilitators distinguishes the feeling of anger as separate from the behavior of aggression. Using dictionary definitions and synonyms for anger and aggression, it is explained that one can feel angry without behaving aggressively, and vice versa. Then members form small groups and are asked to generate examples of anger and aggression, which illustrate the difference.

To distinguish anger from other feelings, members are led through a guided imagery exercise adapted from McKay (1992). A potentially anger-provoking situation is described and a cognitive response of blaming and negatively labeling others is suggested; participants are asked to notice their resulting bodily sensations and emotions and then to write down a description of the experience and label for the feelings. This is repeated twice more with different suggested cognitive responses (thinking about dangerous or catastrophic consequences; then thinking about their own perceived failures and inadequacies). After the guided imagery, participants are given the opportunity to discuss in pairs and then the large group feelings elicited and the distinguishing features they noticed. For clients who have difficulty recognizing feelings, the facilitators can explain how different internal messages and different physical sensations are cues that can help them identify feelings. For clients who are able to recognize feelings, the facilitators can explain how emotional responses are affected by prior cognition. For instance, blaming others may lead to anger, catastrophizing

may lead to anxiety, and self-blaming may lead to depression. However, in presenting these explanations, it is important for the facilitators to respect the participants' individual emotional reactions, which may be evoked through unexpected paths.

Another brief lecture is given, this time to distinguish levels or degrees of anger. It is suggested that anger may be better conceptualized as a continuum than as a dichotomy. An analogy is drawn with light: a light switch is either on or off, but sunlight varies infinitely in brightness. The group is asked to brainstorm to identify synonyms for anger and then asked to arrange them in order from most to least angry.

*Homework assignment:* Members are given Anger Log record sheets adapted from McKay (1992) and asked to monitor their experiences of anger over the remaining weeks of the group sessions. The purpose of the Anger Log is to help clients identify how and when anger occurs, and the circumstances under which they view it as positive or negative. The Anger Log sheets include columns for members to describe their anger experiences, the context in which the anger was felt, the antecedents and consequences of the anger experience, and their feelings or thoughts about feeling and showing their anger.

### **Session 3: Basic Expression of Anger Without Blame/ Assertiveness Technique**

*Content goals.* Participants will learn about stereotypes of women who show their anger and women who hide their anger.

*Process goals.* Participants will have the opportunity to try expressing anger without blame in low difficulty role plays and will be able to observe the expression of anger in a relatively nonthreatening environment.

*Instructions.* Group members are asked to share their experience of using the Anger Log during the previous week. Then



the group leaders initiate a discussion of anger and blame. Handouts consisting of descriptions of the "Nice Lady Syndrome" and the "Bitchy Woman" (Lerner, 1985, pp. 5–10) are provided to help group members identify issues relevant to anger and blame. The characteristic sequence of women's anger and aggression found by Campbell's (1993) qualitative research is explained: Upon provocation, the woman (a) holds anger back with restraint and self-control; (b) the other party misinterprets the woman's restraint as acceptance and continues the provocation, which leads to the woman's anger mounting until it must find some means of release; (c) the first release for most women is crying; (d) but sometimes women erupt into physical aggression; (e) which horrifies, amuses, or embarrasses those around her; and (f) the woman realizes she has broken the rules, distances herself from the event, and feels guilty. For the discussion, the leaders invite the group to consider the following questions: What options do I have to express or not express my anger? What power do I have, and how can I use this power to create change? What responsibilities come with making choices to express anger and request change? Who is ultimately responsible for my well-being? Participants may also discuss their analysis of the gender roles demonstrated in the material present and their feelings about these roles.

After this discussion, each group member is asked to select a low-level anger situation from her own Anger Log, which she is willing to share with the group through a role play in which special attention is paid to blaming behaviors used in anger expression.

Facilitators give participants a list of techniques for giving constructive feedback (Hagen, 1983) and briefly explain the feedback techniques along with the structure of the following role play exercise, which will be used for the rest of the WAA group. Members gather into groups of three consisting of a role player (the person enacting her own anger situation),

a receiver (a person to interact with the role player), and a coach (a person to observe the role play and give feedback afterward). The role player takes about 2 minutes to brief the receiver on the situation and tell the coach what type of feedback she would like. The role play is conducted for 5 to 7 minutes, followed by approximately 7 minutes of feedback and discussion within the group of three. If time allows, this exercise may be repeated with roles rotated, so that each woman has the opportunity to play two, or all three, of the roles.

This session is concluded with a brief, large-group discussion. Group members are encouraged to share their experiences with the role play exercise, particularly if it has led them to identify any changes they would like to make in ways they express anger. Facilitators also address any additional questions of group members.

*Homework Assignment.* Participants are asked to continue to record their Anger Log over the coming week.

#### Session 4: Values/Rights Clarification

*Content goals.* Participants will clarify when the expression of one's own rights and emotions becomes a violation of the rights of someone else, and the potential trade-off between acknowledging anger and "being available" for others.

*Process goals.* Participants will have the opportunity to struggle with beliefs they may have that their anger is not justified, and to receive feedback about these beliefs from other group members.

*Instructions.* For a check-in, group members are asked to share any new experiences they had with anger during the past week, referring to their Anger Logs as necessary. The group leaders facilitate a brief discussion (no more than 10 minutes) that focuses on beliefs group members might hold that their feelings of anger are unfair or unjustified.

An exercise involving sorting cards is used for clarification of anger-related val-

ues. Each participant is given a stack of 35 to 40 cards. A situation in which a person might experience anger is written on each. The following categories are included: conflict with parents, conflict with significant peers, protecting others from harm, protecting oneself from harm, social anger (for example, anger at civil rights violations), and miscellaneous irritations (for example, slow restaurant service). Group members are asked to read each situation and place it on a continuum from *anger is TOTALLY justified* to *anger is TOTALLY NOT justified*. If a member does not connect anger to the situation in any way, she is asked to place it in a category called "I am more likely to feel . . ." and identify the feeling attached to the situation. Group members are asked to identify any patterns of belief that may emerge regarding when and if anger is justified. If time remains, participants may share related insights with the group. Facilitators may use prompting questions such as the following: Under what circumstances does expressing your own emotions or asserting your rights feel to you like it violates someone else's rights? When other people express their emotions to you, do you feel as though your rights have been violated?

**Homework Assignment.** Participants are asked to continue to record in their Anger Log over the coming week. In addition, if participants did not have time to complete the card sort exercise during the session, they are asked to complete it at home.

### **Session 5: Barriers to Change: Recognizing the Benefits of Current Patterns**

**Content goals.** Participants will identify benefits of their current patterns of anger expression or denial which hinder them from making changes to those patterns.

**Process goals.** Participants will participate in moderately difficult role plays in which they attempt new ways of expressing anger that break old patterns and re-

ceive support from role-play partners for changing these patterns.

**Instructions.** During check-in, group members are asked to share their impressions of the anger values exercise as they may have changed over the week. Members may have discovered values conflicts they experienced regarding anger, particularly anger directed at parents and significant others.

The group leaders discuss the difficulty of change and how to recognize benefits and payoffs that can sometimes result from unwanted behaviors. Group members are asked to consider benefits and payoffs they receive from their currently unsatisfactory methods of dealing with anger.

Each member is asked to do a role-play exercise which includes those components of the client's anger that provide her with some benefits. The structure for these is similar to the structure used in Session 3 except that this time the participants select moderate-level anger situations from their Anger Logs. The receiver is asked to share her perceptions of the role player with her at the end of the role play and the coach is asked to help the role player find other ways of obtaining the benefit she is accustomed to receiving through her usual expression (or nonexpression) of anger. The goal of this exercise is to alter the ways in which anger is expressed, not to decrease or eliminate the client's anger. Several group members have indicated that they received rewards for *not* expressing anger, and the intent in this exercise is to help them learn that they could receive some rewards while expressing anger.

The exercise lasts approximately 45 minutes. It is followed by a discussion of ways that old patterns of managing anger have been rewarded by significant others, such that those rewards became barriers to the changes group members want for themselves.

**Homework Assignment:** Group members are asked to continue their Anger Log, but to add an additional column in which to make note of ways in which they experience rewards for continuing in their old

pattern of anger expression or nonexpression. They are instructed to pay particular attention during the coming week to the enactment of these rewards, which operate as barriers to change.

### **Session 6: Advanced Expression Activity; Response Choice Exercises**

*Content goals.* Participants will learn about the concept of response choices (McKay, 1992) and synthesize previous materials.

*Process goals.* Participants will participate in high difficulty level role plays of situations in which there are rewards for remaining stuck in their old patterns of anger expression or nonexpression, and will experience and evaluate these rewards through feedback from role-play partners.

*Instructions.* As a check-in, members are asked to share their observations and discoveries of barriers to the changes they want to make regarding anger. The facilitators lead a brief discussion to review all of the information and perspectives explored during the previous 5 weeks of the group, including observations made by participants during the previous week. To anchor these observations, each group member is asked to write down the areas in which she felt confident about herself and her feelings of anger, and also those aspects of anger that were most difficult for her to handle or accept.

Most of this session is devoted to role plays. In preparation for the role-plays, one of the group leaders gives a brief lecture about response choice rehearsal switching (McKay, 1992). Participants form role play groups of three, as described in Session 3. Each role player selects a recent situation from her life when she experienced high levels of anger. The receiver and the coach play similar roles as in previous role plays. In this instance, the receiver is asked to focus on eliciting the kinds of responses

with which the role player recognized having the most difficulty. The coach helps the role player handle these responses in a manner consistent with her stated anger-expression goals. For example, one client discovered that she had the most difficulty with her own anger when others did not acknowledge that it was valid. This would typically cause her to "blow up" and feel as if she had lost control. In this case, the receiver repeatedly minimized and ridiculed the role player's anger. The role player reacted as she normally would, then began to practice other methods of response that helped her to feel more empowered and more in control of her anger. The coach suggested new methods to help her do so and helped the role player assess her feelings of control and comfort with them.

This type of role play is likely to lead to members actually experiencing strong feelings of anger within the group. The 20 to 30 minutes at the end of the session should be devoted to discussion and processing, with a focus on how people feel about becoming significantly angry within the group itself, perhaps feeling anger toward other group members.

*Homework Assignment.* Each group member is asked to acknowledge her progress by writing down the accomplishments she believes she made during the role play and the changes she recognizes in her response to anger. Continued regular writing in the Anger Log is encouraged.

### **Session 7: Negotiating Relationships**

*Content goals.* Participants will learn that they can expect family, friends, and general societal forces to exert "change back" pressures that encourage participants to return to their old patterns of anger expression or nonexpression.

*Process goals.* Members will participate in role plays in which they practice resisting "change back" messages and will ex-

perience the difficulty of resisting these messages.

*Instructions.* Check-in for this session consists of group member reports from their Anger Logs and observations of change occurring over the last several weeks. Discussion focuses on the tendency for people in the clients' lives to want them to "stay the same" regarding the expression (or nonexpression) of anger. This is most likely to be true for women who are learning to express their anger more clearly and assertively, because people often confuse women's assertiveness with aggression (Phelps & Austin, 1987). Facilitators describe ways in which significant people in group members' lives might try to persuade them to "change back" to their previous selves. Significant others may resort to covert reinforcement or punishment, direct requests, and overt reinforcement or punishment. Group members then consider ways in which they can resist these "change back" messages. Next, using the same format as Session 3, group members role-play these "change back" situations.

Final discussion focuses on "change back" messages at the societal level: roles of women in society; "advantages" to traditional society of keeping women in limited, nonassertive positions; and ways in which individual women can make a difference to society by refusing to "change back."

## **Session 8: Termination and Closure**

*Content goals.* Participants will discuss the experience of this group, exchange feedback, and complete evaluation forms for the group facilitators.

*Process goals.* Participants will have opportunities to reflect on what the group has meant to them and to reach closure regarding the experience by sharing their feelings and experiences with group members.

*Instructions.* As a check-in for this last session, group members complete the sentence, "From this group, I have learned . . ."

in any way that feels important to them. Subsequently, the group facilitators describe the closure exercise to be used, which involves writing and sharing affirmations for each group member.

Each group member is given a card with her name on it, which is then passed around so that other members may write notes that begin with the following: "The changes you've made . . ." and "What I wish for you . . ." Alternatively, the affirmations might include a comment about what one group member learned from another, what was special about a particular group member, or similar comments. The group is given roughly 20 minutes to write these. After the cards are returned, members are asked to share as much of the contents as they wish.

The final 15 minutes of the group are spent processing the closure exercise and reviewing changes made by members as a result participating in the group. The group facilitators also share their impressions with members, and provide feedback for each member about her contribution to the group. We suggest that group facilitators request feedback from the participants by distributing brief, written evaluation forms and allowing time for group members to fill them out before the conclusion of the group sessions.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Evaluations indicated that several factors contributed to the effectiveness of this group experience. First, all group members agreed or strongly agreed that the group was helpful for meeting personal goals. For example, one woman stated, "I felt stronger about myself and my abilities. I set a goal and attained it." Second, members were asked what was most helpful about the group. They identified two elements: (a) Members appreciated hearing other women talk about anger in ways they could relate to and apply to themselves in some way, and (b) the structured

role-play activities helped them to better recognize, understand, and work with their anger. We believe that these factors may have allowed participation of women who felt "left out" or intimidated by group interactions.

There were also some differences within the group in terms of perceived group effectiveness. Women who were originally referred to the group because of difficulty acknowledging and recognizing anger seemed to consider the group more effective. These women indicated that it was important for them to see that women could be angry without being punished. They also reported that hearing the experiences of other women helped them feel stronger and more confident. In contrast, women who had entered the group because of concerns about "explosive" anger reported some frustration about the emphasis on validating anger. They also indicated a desire to receive more specific advice for dealing with anger more quickly in the group process. Although we had originally thought that the two distinctly different experiences with anger would enhance the group experience, it is not clear that this was the case. Perhaps members' differing past experiences and resulting responses to anger created needs that were different enough to limit the potential for learning from each other.

Limitations of the group were also identified by group members. First, several women commented that the amount of time provided seemed too short; perhaps too many topics were addressed within the 8 weeks. In Session 7 it might be better to omit the discussion of societal pressure to "change back" to previous behaviors, and allow more time for the role plays. Also, the use of the Anger Logs was somewhat attenuated because of time restrictions. Time constraints may not permit full processing of the logs. It might be better to delete this activity or use it in a more limited form.

Second, several women indicated they wanted to focus more on cognitive skills

for dealing with anger, rather than actually feeling anger, or some related emotion, in the group. It is also important to note that there was attrition from the group. Two of the three women who had identified their issue as having "explosive" or "out of control" anger left the group prematurely. Both indicated that they wanted to change their angry behavior more quickly and not focus as much on understanding the experience of anger.

Although this was a small group, the evaluation of the experience does provide implications for future groups to consider. First, this group seemed to most effectively meet the needs of those women who had initially had a difficult time acknowledging and identifying anger. It might be that potential group members with concern about explosive or acting-out types of anger would benefit more from a separate group. Alternatively, including more of a balance between "experiencing" and "changing" anger behaviors from the earliest sessions might better meet the needs of a mixed group. Second, a great deal of information is covered in a fairly short time. Future groups may want to allow more time for some topics and omit those that are not as relevant. Third, based on the experience of the leaders, it is necessary to allow enough flexibility in the group to accommodate unanticipated needs of members. At times, a session agenda may be considerably revised during the course of the meeting. This may provide the opportunity to model flexibility and communication with the group, as the decision-making process is openly shared with group members.

The Women and Anger group provided a valuable learning experience for women who wanted to gain a better understanding of the role of anger in their lives. Adopting a flexible structure allowed the women to safely explore anger issues in a systematic environment, while knowing there was room to depart from the structure as necessary. This format may be adapted and used by group leaders to pro-

vide a valuable service to women struggling with the difficult and often confusing issue of anger.

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