

Does Anger Management Really Stop Domestic Violence?

It's often sanctioned by judges, but is it actually effective?

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Apr 09, 2025

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Key Takeaways:

1. Anger management may not address the root cause of domestic violence: Experts argue that domestic violence is often rooted in power, control and cultural influences, rather than just anger. Anger management focuses on controlling emotional outbursts but does not address deeper issues like past trauma, entitlement or misogyny that fuel abusive behavior.

2. Trauma-informed care may be more effective: Alternatives like trauma-informed therapies such as EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) and LENS (low energy neurofeedback system) focus on the root causes of abusive behavior, such as unresolved childhood trauma, and aim to help abusers recognize and manage triggers instead of just suppressing anger.

3. Batterer intervention programs (BIPPs) target the system of control: BIPPs educate abusers about the dynamics of power and control in relationships, helping them understand the societal and cultural factors that contribute to their behavior, offering a more comprehensive approach than anger management.

Court-ordered anger management is a common recommendation after abusers are charged with violence against their partner. After all, don't they just need to learn how to control their temper and the problem will be solved?

Not exactly, say experts. Curbing the epidemic of violence against women for good takes more than deep breathing. Domestic violence is rooted in power and control often supported by one's culture and childhood influences.

After all, abusive partners aren't necessarily angry at everyone. Their anger is a tactic of control aimed specifically at one person: their intimate partner. So, does anger management *actually* work for domestic violence?

"The root cause of domestic violence is not usually anger; rather vulnerability is often the trigger that takes people to a historical place of believing they are the ones that are in danger, that they are being victimized, and that if they do not regain power and control, something bad may happen to them," says Dr. Cio Hernandez, PhD, licensed therapist, CEO of the Be It Foundation and founder of Got This, Inc.

Of course, most experts agree that domestic violence stems from entitlement, supported by our culture of historic male superiority, sexism and toxic masculinity. A symptom of that entitlement is anger, an uncomfortable emotion that often arises in abusive partners when they feel like they can't control the situation around them. Anger also comes from the perceived feeling of being wronged by someone close to them.

"Anger may start as a body memory from that time in the past that required a tactic of power and control for what they believed was a survival at that time. If their body, thoughts and feelings took them to a young age [version of themselves] who is running the show, then the behaviors that

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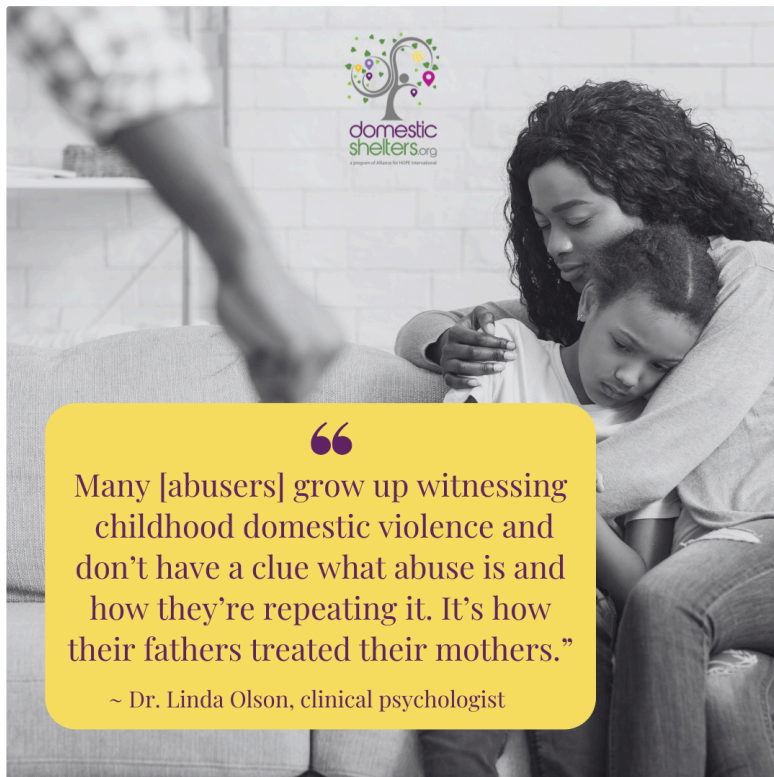
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come back to the grown-up are from the reactivity skills of a 5-year-old who resorts to violence to protect themselves, but anger is not the cause,”

In that sense, for domestic abusers, Dr. Cio suggests anger management is likely teaching the wrong thing.

Looking at Childhood Triggers of Domestic Abusers



“

Many [abusers] grow up witnessing childhood domestic violence and don't have a clue what abuse is and how they're repeating it. It's how their fathers treated their mothers.”

~ Dr. Linda Olson, clinical psychologist

“Teaching people how to *not* experience their emotions may actually be more dangerous in the long run,” she says. “Anger management has typically shown poor long-term results with high recidivism because it often focuses on changing behavior without focusing on the entire brain, body and other memory networks—the neuropathways that create our internal stories.”

Judges continue to resort to ordering anger management for domestic abusers likely due to a lack of other resources available, because it's less expensive than other modalities or because they're not aware that there are other options. They may rely on data that shows anger management works to control outbursts. However, many of these studies look at individuals who are angry—angry because of their job, angry when they drive, angry at the current political climate—but not necessarily abusive to a partner. These are not comparable, say experts.

Instead, Dr. Cio's nonprofit is working with judges in Texas and California to consider well-researched trauma-informed care techniques like EMDR, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, as well as LENS, or low energy neurofeedback system, in place of anger management for domestic abusers or talk therapy alone. The strategy, she explains, addresses past memories when individuals may not have been in control of their bodies or their behaviors. These memories can trigger the abuser in the present day when they encounter a similar situation, such as in a relationship where they feel like they need to be in control but aren't.

Anger management classes often focus on triggers, but not on their root causes. For instance, does an abusive partner know why he goes into a rage when the bed isn't made exactly how he's requested? Was it because he was harmed as a child for making that same mistake?

“If they can recognize that the now grown-up is triggered, they can zoom up to see the bigger picture of what is happening, self-regulate and open their window to tolerate more stressors, letting the inner child know that the grown-up is taking care of them now and they are not in danger,” says Dr. Cio.

Advocates have long preached the importance of acknowledging adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs. It's estimated that anywhere from just over half to two-thirds of all children will experience at least one ACE in their lifetime. The higher one's ACE score, the more at risk they

are of not only physical and mental health issues, but also becoming a victim of abuse or abusing a partner.

“Many [abusers] grow up witnessing childhood domestic violence and don’t have a clue what abuse is and how they’re repeating it. It’s how their fathers treated their mothers,” says Dr. Linda Olson, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist and social worker with over 30 years of experience treating victims of trauma.

Anger Management May Not Address Misogyny

“There is this system, which I count as misogyny, that functions to police and enforce patriarchal norms and expectations,” philosopher Kate Manne tells us in “What Fuels Domestic Violence?” Manne is the author of *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* and *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*.

“Both norms and expectations have to do with feeling, as a man, entitled to certain goods like sex and care and reproductive and emotional labor from women,” continues Manne. “And it makes sense that if you have those false beliefs about what women owe to men, that there would be a common phenomenon of lashing out at women who don’t deliver those goods.

Misogyny often manifests as a sense of shame, anger and denial, agrees Olson. Ego and pride also come into play, but Olson says these are also markers of something being “wrong” with the abuser.

“It’s control, it’s overreaction, explosive outbursts, an imbalance of power and demeaning and degrading their partner,” says Olson.

If misogyny is at the heart of power and control, and those facets are what fuels angry outbursts, wouldn’t it make sense to talk about misogyny first?

Dr. Cio says anger management may inadvertently be training people to dissociate from angry feelings instead of feeling and identifying what the feelings mean, and responding appropriately.

“What happens to the inner 2-year-old that keeps being triggered that they do not matter...or the 4-year-old whose parents were substance users who learned to take care of everyone and everything so that their own needs could be met?” asks Dr. Cio.

“Anger management begins to look like something that doesn’t have the good of the individual at heart, but instead plays an important supporting role in molding acquiescent employees and submissive citizens,” writes Oliva Watson for The Guardian. Watson chose to attend an online anger management class after she felt like she’d had one-too-many angry outbursts. What she learned, she wrote in part, is that the instruction focused more on being complacent and not so much on asking questions about why one gets so angry.

“This focus on individual behavioral change, to the exclusion of a more socially focused understanding of an individual’s problem, is a key concern in Bessel van der Kolk’s pioneering book *The Body Keeps the Score*, in which Van der Kolk repeatedly laments the use of therapeutic techniques and medication aimed at controlling a person’s behavior, rather than addressing the ‘undeniable social causation of much psychological suffering,’” Watson writes.

Because, as Dr. Cio reminds us, abusers, too, can believe that they are the ones who were the actual victims of the abuse, typically stemming from their childhoods. They can feel vulnerable, out of control and not sure how to deal with it except for fighting for their lives, physically or in other negative ways.

Anger Management Versus Batterer Intervention Programs

Batterer intervention and prevention programs (BIPPs) are another option courts and domestic violence advocates may consider when attempting to change an abuser’s behavior. In lieu of learning about what may trigger anger, BIPPs try to reach abusers through education, accountability and the ramifications of their power and control in their partners’ lives. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.

The idea of reforming abusers is often misunderstood—the goal is not to “cure” the abuser of some infliction forcing them to abuse, it’s to educate abusive men about the “male supremacist, patriarchal system that has allowed them to believe it’s okay to control women,” says Phyllis

Frank, past president of the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and the founder of—what was called in 1978—the Spouse Abuse Educational Workshop.

BIPPs exist all over the country and range from a weekend to an entire year of weekly group meetings with other participants. The education focuses on healthy, non-violent relationship strategies.

Abusers are provided, says Frank, with up-to-date information about “every aspect we understand ourselves about domestic violence, its history, its currency, why there are such epidemic numbers of men mistreating women.” And, she adds, “this is key—we provide information that proves to him that any man is capable of treating the woman who is his intimate partner respectfully.”

To learn more, read “To End Abuse, First End Male Entitlement.”

Does Anger Management Have Any Benefits?

While anger management may not be the solution for ending intimate partner violence, it doesn’t mean that it’s a complete wash, says Meghan Terwilliger, LCMHC at Desert Clover Psychiatry.

“Anger management therapy can be beneficial for [some] individuals who struggle with emotional regulation, impulsivity or difficulty expressing frustration in a healthy way,” says Terwilliger. “However, when it comes to IPV [intimate partner violence, or domestic violence], the concern is often not just anger but a pattern of control, manipulation and coercion over a partner.”

Terwilliger says some potential benefits of anger management can include help with emotional regulation and teaching coping strategies, such as mindfulness, communication and self-awareness. However, since anger management courses aren’t regulated in any concise way, meaning the anger management in Ohio courts could radically differ from what California is teaching, there’s no way to know if the one your abusive partner is ordered to attend will be effective.

Anger Management Is Not a Cure-All

If your abusive partner is escalating their control or violence, has physically or sexually harmed you in the past; has used strangulation as an abusive tactic,(including during sex); has threatened to kill you or himself; has harmed your children or pets; or doesn’t show any remorse after an abusive incident, it’s unlikely that one anger management course is going to transform your relationship into something safe and respectful.

It’s more likely that the abuse will escalate after an arrest as a not-so-subtle threat to victims to keep the violence behind closed doors. Even if there is a break in the power and control dynamic, even a period of relative peace or the abuser seems to be more romantic or caring, it’s important to watch out for the returning red flags. See “What is the Cycle of Abuse” to learn more.

Before leaving an abusive partner, consider reaching out to a trained domestic violence advocate for help with safety planning, a blueprint for lessening the chances of an incident before separating from an abuser.

