

## Alternatives to Violence Project and Anger Management

Does AVP offer 'Anger Management'(AM)? Can we legitimately claim that our programme covers AM?

### What is 'Anger Management'?

AM is not a trade mark or a copyrighted method. It is not a single recognised approach. AM books and courses typically take a Cognitive-Behavioural (CBT) approach, and cover some or all of the following:

- ❖ A **definition or explanation** of what 'anger' is, i.e. an emotion triggered by the perception of a threat, and associated with the physiological symptoms of the 'fight or flight' reaction. (This is a typical definition, which may not cover all manifestations of 'anger'.) An understanding of how anger functions physically, and why it occurs, appears helpful in that it demystifies what is happening to us, and helps us recognise it more coolly and objectively, and appreciate that it is not necessarily a 'bad' thing: it helps protect us from threats and is thus instrumental to our survival.
  - AVP conveys the message that anger is ok: there is no need to feel guilty about it so long as we manage it and express it non-violently. The iceberg or NVC model shows that it arises as a response to an unmet need. The Level 2 exercise 'Underlying Anger/The Roots of Anger' also helps analyse how it arises and why.
- ❖ Identifying **triggers** for anger, and either avoid them or change the situation.
  - AVP covers this with 'triggers', 'buttons', and developing problem-solving skills.
- ❖ Identifying the **stages of anger build-up and calming strategies** which can be applied to tackle it at each stage, such as physical exercise, deep breathing or the famous 'counting to 10'. These superficial crisis management techniques are arguably only effective in the early stages of anger, so that recognising early signs and tackling it early is crucial.
  - AVP covers this with the Anger Escalator or Anger Volcano in Level 1.
- ❖ **Cognitive approaches** focusing on analysing and modifying the **thought processes** associated with anger. There are several aspects to this, some of which are helpful, and some of which are based on an outdated and groundless notion that emotions are always triggered by thoughts, rather than the other way around. Overall it seems helpful to develop awareness of how our thinking can contribute to our anger. For example, we may have a tendency to take things personally, or make assumptions or judgements that others are deliberately slighting and threatening us, while they may in fact have no such intention. A cognitive approach will encourage us to think of the situation in different ways, and realise that

there may be any number of innocent reasons for another's unwelcome action.

- AVP covers this with 'From another point of view', and developing empathy and appreciation of what might be going on for other parties. Follow-up interviews with participants suggest that 'seeing things from another perspective' is one of the most profound and lasting lessons which people take away from AVP.
- ❖ Communication skills, focusing on **expressing feelings** calmly, using 'I feel', and opening constructive conversations to solve the problem.
  - AVP works extensively on communication skills, assertiveness and problem-solving skills, notably with 'blaming and non-blaming language', concentric circles, hassle lines and role-play.

## **AM versus AVP**

While AM thus generally offers useful advice and techniques for managing low-level anger when it arises, it does little to address deeper underlying issues associated with anger, such as low self-esteem, poor relationships, depression and dissatisfaction with one's life. In addition to covering the same ground as AM, AVP also offers an environment where individuals can feel safe, relax, learn to appreciate themselves and others, and build the confidence to make profound changes to their lives. Crucially, AVP also offers space to think about violence and its consequences, and develop alternative conflict-resolution skills.

## **Conclusion**

Having compared AM with AVP, I think we can confidently say that we offer 'anger management', embedded within a deeper and more holistic approach focussed on developing respect for self and others, and empowering people to make fulfilling life choices, preventing anger and violence longer-term.