

Article 53

Ten Creative Counseling Techniques for Helping Clients Deal With Anger

Christine J. Schimmel and Ed Jacobs

Schimmel, Christine J., is an Assistant Professor at West Virginia University where she coordinates the school counseling program. Dr. Schimmel's research interests include issues related to school counseling, group counseling, and creative counseling interventions.

Jacobs, Ed, is an Associate Professor at West Virginia University where he coordinates the counseling program. Dr. Jacobs' interests lie in the areas of group counseling, Impact Therapy, a counseling approach which he developed, and creative counseling techniques, an area for which he is recognized and presents on at the national level.

Introduction

Anger is an emotion that counselors often address with their clients. Beck and Fernandez (1998) note that, in the mental health field, "attention has turned to anger as a major problem in human relations" (p. 63). Blake and Hamrin (2007) point out that anger and its resulting issues, such as oppositional defiant disorder, are among the most common reasons adolescents and children are referred to mental health services. Anger, typically characterized as either state or trait in nature, is usually experienced along a continuum from little or no anger, to mild or moderate levels of frustration, annoyance, or irritability, to advanced levels of fury and rage (Deffenbacher, et al., 1996). Regardless of the determined nature of the anger, counselors need a theoretical conceptualization along with a delivery system that causes the client to reflect on their anger. This article focuses on one potential delivery system—that is, creative ways to work with clients on their anger issues.

The last few years have seen an increase in the acceptance and value of the use of employing more non-traditional techniques in the counseling relationship (Haley, 1986; Mosak & Maniaci, 1998). The conceptualization and realization of a division of the American Counseling Association, the Association for Creativity in Counseling, devoted to such practices is proof that infusing creativity in the counseling process is accepted now more than ever (Duffy, 2006/2007). Whether it be the use of poetry and writing (Gladding, 1979; Gladding, 2005), the use of props and movement (Jacobs, 1992; Jacobs, 1994; Schimmel, 2007), or the use of humor (Goldin et al., 2006), more creative counseling interventions are being used with not only children and adolescents, but adults and families as well (Casado-Kehoe & Kehoe, 2007; Murray & Rotter, 2002).

Why Use Creative Techniques?

According to Jacobs (1992), the use of creative counseling techniques fulfills a counselor's need for a multi-faceted approach to helping clients. Creative counseling approaches and specifically the use of creative techniques allows the counselor to approach an issue from a multi-sensory vantage point, tapping into a client's visual, auditory and experiential learning style. As Nickerson and O'Laughlin (1982) pointed out, using one approach to counseling that primarily involves just talking limits what we can accomplish as helpers. Additionally, Beaulieu (2003) enforces the idea that therapists need to "get beyond words and enlist more of the client's senses" (p.1). Creative counseling techniques aide in helping make concepts like anger more concrete, aide in enhancing the learning process, help to focus the session at times when clients begin to get off track, and help to quicken the counseling process for counselors who have a limited amount of time with clients (Jacobs, 1992).

Below are 10 creative counseling techniques specifically geared for use with clients who are dealing with both state and trait anger. Included along with each technique are examples of how the counselor might choose to use this technique and samples of dialogue from a mock counseling session. Some of the techniques discussed have been previously introduced in the literature in Jacobs' *Creative Counseling Techniques: An Illustrated Guide* (1992) and *Impact Therapy* (1994) books. Many of the techniques have been presented by Jacobs and Schimmel at various national and state conferences. The examples are unique to this article.

Fuse

Clients who get angry easily can be shown pieces of string, cut to various lengths from very short to long, with an explanation that a person with a very short fuse tends to get angry and explode (yell, scream, fight, get into trouble) more quickly than someone with a longer fuse.

Counselor: So when you get angry, you just explode?

Client: Yes, I do. Last week when my husband messed up the checkbook, I just yelled and screamed at him until the poor guy finally had to leave the house because I was so out of control and would not stop yelling at him.

Counselor: And that happens to you a lot? So much so that it is becoming a problem at work?

Client: Well, that is why I am here; I blow up at work about what other people seem to just be able to let go—but I can't.

Counselor: Sounds like we have to do something about your short fuse. (Counselor holds up very small piece of string—approximately one inch long). When something does not go the way you think it should, or someone behaves in a way that you would demand they not behave—like when your husband got into the checkbook without your permission—it's like someone lights this fuse and you blow up.

Client: Yes, that is true.

Counselor: But what would happen if we worked to get you a longer fuse, a fuse more like this? (Counselor holds up a long piece of string—approximately 12 inches long.) What would happen then if you had a longer fuse?

Client: Well, I would probably not blow up as quickly, right?

Counselor: Yes, you would have time to think and react to the situation and not just react and blow up.

Client: But how do I get a longer fuse?

Counselor: That is something that I can teach you. Would you *like* to learn how to get a longer fuse?

Client: Yes, I would.

The counselor would then proceed with teaching how the client's self-talk leads to the increased anger response and how changing her self-talk can allow for a calmer, more rational response to stimuli that would have previously resulted in an angry outburst. The counselor would keep emphasizing that the client's more rational, different, self-talk leads to a longer fuse.

Shield

Oftentimes, clients who deal with anger point to others for the onset of their anger. For example, counselors often hear that a family member or a supervisor at work "made them mad." When a client's anger is a response to feeling attacked by another person, it can be useful to teach them that they have a mental shield.

Counselor: It seems like you feel attacked by your boss a lot and when you feel that way, you get angry and have some sort of outburst. Is that what I am hearing?

Client: Yes. I just feel like he is on me all of the time and he says stuff that I can't stand. The other day he came at me because he didn't like the way I opened the supervisor's meeting. He is just always on me about something.

Counselor: It sounds like you need to use a shield with your boss.

Client: A what? A shield?

Counselor: Yes, what does a shield do?

Client: You use shields to protect yourself, right?

Counselor: Exactly. That is what shields do! They protect you. Right now, you don't protect yourself when your boss comes at you with these things, you feel attacked and then you lash out. Let me show you how this looks with and without a shield. I'm going to be your boss and say something and as I do it I'm going to tap you on your shoulder if that's okay? (Client nods.)

Counselor: (Counselor stands in front of the client and pokes the client.) “You need to put much more energy into the opening of the supervisors meeting and you have to stand and use a more forceful voice. You can’t get anything right!”

Client: That is what happens.

Counselor: (Counselor takes an 8 1/2 X 11 piece of plexiglass—representing the shield and holds up to the client.) Here, hold this. When I come at you, I want you to protect yourself with this. (Counselor role-plays client’s boss poking at the client but the shield blocks the advance.) “You need to put much more energy into the opening of the supervisors meeting and you have to stand and use a more forceful voice. You can’t get anything right!” How does it feel to have some protection?

Client: I still don’t like the yelling, but it did feel a bit better to not have him getting to me like before.

Counselor: Right! You don’t like it that he yells, but if you and I work together to figure out how you can use your shield, you can at least protect yourself, and deflect those comments so that you will blow up a lot less or possibly not at all.

Client: That would be great if I could learn to do that. What do I need to learn?

Counselor: Your shield really can be a concept in your mind; that is, you can say to yourself something like—“I have to get my expectations in line with reality.”

The counselor would then go on to explain this in greater detail and help the client change her self-talk. The counselor would then proceed to explain how the shield is helpful in dealing with the other person’s negative rhetoric. The client can deflect the comments instead of absorbing them and feeling both hurt and anger.

Filter

The difference between a shield and a filter is that filters do allow for some material to pass through. Children and adolescents will often say that “good stuff” passes through and “bad stuff” gets caught in the filter. Filters help clients sort out any helpful pieces of communication and can trap or filter pieces of communication that would typically trigger an angry outburst.

Counselor: So normally how a fight with your parents begins is that they get onto you about something and then you get angry and yell and then there is a fight. Is that right?

Client: Yes, that is what usually happens.

Counselor: So what kinds of things will your parents get onto you about?

Client: It’s always “you need to work harder in school,” and “how many times have we told you to wear a seatbelt,” and “be more responsible for your things!” It is always something.

Counselor: Let me ask you this, do you think there is any good to any of the things that they yell at you about or is it just that they like to yell at you?

Client: What do you mean?

Counselor: When you say they yell at you about working harder in school, I hear “we want you to do well in school,” but you hear, what? “You are not good enough?”

Client: Something like that, I guess.

Counselor: Here, take this. (Counselor hands client a small, furnace filter.) I think if I can teach you to filter out the message, then maybe you would not get so angry and blow up at your parents. You hear “you’re not good enough,” or “you are always messing up,” and I am not sure that is the message your parents intend to send or that they intend for you to hear. If you could let the loudness of their voices, the tone of their approach get caught up in the filter, then you could hear the “clean” messages that come out on the other side. I think the messages are really “do well in school, stay safe, and learn responsibility,” and those are really not bad things to want for your son, are they?

Client: No, I guess not. It just feels bad to have to hear that.

Counselor: That is because you are not filtering it out and then you get your feelings hurt and when we get our feelings hurt, we lash back. If you could learn to use your filter, I think we could really reduce the fighting between you and your parents. Want to work on it?

Client: Sure.

The counselor explains how, if the client filters the comments, she will not be angry at the person who tends to say both hurtful and helpful comments. Anger occurs when one feels that someone is trying to hurt them. By using the filter, a client can learn to not feel hurt by the other person.

The Three R’s

Clients who struggle with anger issues typically act out before taking the time to contemplate the negative consequences of their actions. When this is the case, teaching clients the Three R’s of how to deal with a situation can be useful.

Counselor: Let me see if I have this right. You get mad about something at school and the first thing you do is blow up—you hit someone or you punch the locker, which gets you in trouble, or you cuss at the teacher, which also leads to trouble. Is that about right?

Client: Yes. That is pretty much what happens.

Counselor: Then you get pulled to the principal’s office where you get some time to think about what you did, and then you feel bad and have second thoughts about how you handled that situation. Is that right?

Client: Yeah, I do usually feel bad after I calm down and then I always wish I had done something differently.

Counselor: So this is what you do: you react—you punch, hit or cuss; you then retreat—get pulled to the office; and then you rethink—take time to contemplate things you could have done instead of what you actually did. (Counselor writes the words in this order on a whiteboard or a large piece of paper for the client to see.)

React

Retreat

Rethink

Client: Yes, that is pretty much what I do.

Counselor: And that doesn't work well for you because by the time you rethink, you are already in trouble. I think we need to try to get you to rearrange how this goes for you.

Client: What do you mean?

Counselor: What if we could get you to not react first. What if we could get you to retreat first, then rethink, and then react? How do you think life would be different?

Client: I probably would not get into as much trouble. But that is hard to do!

Counselor: It is not easy given that you have not practiced doing it and learning to retreat at first can be tough.

Client: I don't want to be thought of as someone who just runs away.

Counselor: I understand. Retreating doesn't necessarily mean running away. It could mean that you have to find somewhere in your mind to go to so you can think through what you are about to do. You retreat in your mind, rethink about how you want a situation to go, and then you can respond instead of reacting which usually leads to trouble for you.

Client: Seems tough.

Counselor: I can help you learn how to do it, though, if you want.

Client: I really need to stop getting into so much trouble that is for sure. I'm willing to try it.

Counselor: What we will work on is having the order be like it on the right instead of the left. (Counselor writes on the board.)

React

Retreat

Retreat

Rethink

Rethink

Respond (a thoughtful reaction)

The counselor would then work with the client on how to retreat and rethink first. By learning this tool, a client can reduce his tendency toward impulsive anger outbursts.

Rearview Mirror

Some clients have anger related to events that have transpired long ago. This is when using the prop of a rearview mirror can have great impact.

Counselor: This incident between you and your brother happened about 10 years ago and you are still mad about it today—in 2009?

Client: Yes, I just can't seem to let it go.

Counselor: Let me ask you a question. What is this? (Counselor holds up a rearview mirror from a car.)

Client: A rearview mirror.

Counselor: Correct. How do you use a rearview mirror? Do you drive always keeping your eyes focused on the rearview mirror or do you simply glance up at it every now and again to check what is coming up behind you?

Client: You should just use it to glance into, if you focus on it, you will crash.

Counselor: Right! The same is true of you and this situation with your brother. If you keep driving your life by focusing on what happened 10 years ago, you are going to keep crashing into things. It is ok to glance at that incident—to remind you that you don't want to go back there—so it won't sneak up on you. But if you keep focusing on how angry you were, you are probably going to stay angry and keep running into problems with that anger.

This technique helps clients overcome anger that is unfinished or unresolved. Helping clients see the present and future and not just focus on the past is helpful for those clients who are angry about past behaviors of people in their lives.

Pop Bottle to Water Bottle

At times, clients who suffer from angry outbursts can relate to the build up of anger inside of them like pressure in a shaken pop bottle. Counselors who use this analogy find that when helping clients understand this concept, actually showing them a bottle of pop that is about to explode lends a visual reference point to the client's anger.

Counselor: When you get mad, you just explode all over anyone and everyone in your path. Is that correct?

Client: It sure is. Usually I explode at my wife and we just have a mess for days—we don't talk, we don't hang out or anything.

Counselor: So it is sort of like this. (Counselor takes a bottle of pop, shakes it and hands it to the client.) Here, open this.

Client: Heck no! I am not opening that! It will make a mess.

Counselor: You are right. It will. But that is what you do at home and at work when you get angry, isn't it? You get all shook up about something,

you let it build up, and then you just explode all over the place and anyone who gets in your way gets messy.

Client: True.

Counselor: What is the difference between this (counselor holds up a pop bottle) and this? (Counselor holds up a bottle of water.) Would you shake this one and open it? (Counselor points to bottle of water.)

Client: Sure. That one would not explode.

Counselor: Right. This one (counselor indicates the bottled water) is clear, not cloudy. That is what we need to do with your thinking if we want to stop your angry explosions. We need to get you so you are clear thinking and not full of cloudy thinking. That way, when things happen that shake you a bit, you don't explode. Do you want to work on that?

Client: Yes, that sounds good to me.

The counselor in this case then proceeds with teaching the client from a cognitive-behavioral framework to understand his behavior as it relates to his self-talk. The counselor would teach that angry outbursts are caused by the client's self talk and not the other person or events.

Deck of Cards

Clients who have difficulty controlling their anger often report that they are unable to change their approach to difficult situations because of a family history of anger and even violence. When this is the case, counselors may find that using a deck of cards can be an effective way to dispute that loss of control is genetic and unable to be changed.

Client: I know you are supposed to help me with my anger, but that just isn't going to happen. I got this from my dad. He was always getting angry, my grandpa, his dad, always got angry. I come from a long line of people who just get angry. There is no way I can change.

Counselor: Maybe you are right. Hey, since we have an hour together anyway, and since you don't really think I can help, are you up to playing some cards?

Client: Sure. We might as well.

Counselor: (Counselor deals client five cards then deals herself five cards. Counselor looks over her cards and takes two from the deck.) Looks like I win. (Counselor reveals her hand to the client. The counselor had fixed the deck knowing that the client would be dealt a very bad poker hand!)

Client: Well that is not fair; you didn't let me draw.

Counselor: That's right, you don't get to draw. You have to play the hand you were dealt.

Client: But that is not fair.

Counselor: I am just playing by your rules. You are the one that told me that you can't change; you have to play the anger card because that is what you were dealt in life. You can't change, right?

Client: Oh, I see. So you think I can change?

Counselor: I think you could go to the deck and get some cards and make a better hand, but you have to be willing to get the help you deserve. I can help you, but you have to be open to the fact that you can change; that you don't have to play the hand you were dealt.

Client: I see that now.

This tool helps clients deal with unresolved anger. Clients who think there is nothing they can do to change their anger are often helped by this technique.

Writing Exercises Emphasizing REBT (NOT TRUE/TRUE Chart)

Effective counseling occurs when counseling theory is used to help clients work through issues. This is especially true when helping clients deal with anger. Theories that are especially beneficial when dealing with anger are Ellis' theory of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT; Ellis & MacLaren, 1998) as well as cognitive-behavioral therapy which draws on both REBT and behavior modification (Beck & Fernandez, 1998). Ellis's basic premise is that one's anger is caused by "should thoughts" that the client is telling himself. However, simply talking to clients about their irrational thoughts as they relate to their anger is often not enough. Clients benefit when they see the essence of their irrational thoughts written out before them. Using a large flip chart, dry erase board or a note pad to write out the sentences so that clients can see their irrational and rational thoughts is recommended. One option is to use a NOT TRUE-TRUE grid to show clients how their thoughts lead to feelings. The grid below clearly shows that the thoughts on the left under the NOT TRUE column would lead to anger and the thoughts under the TRUE column on the right would lead to less angry feelings.

NOT TRUE	TRUE
I can't stand it when my boss talks to me that way!	I don't like it when my boss talks to me that way, but I can stand it.
He should not act that way with me!	I wish he would not act that way with me, but unfortunately he does and I can't control him.
He should treat me with respect and if he doesn't, it means I am weak for letting it happen.	I wish he would treat me with respect, but sometimes he doesn't. It doesn't mean I am weak.
Very Angry	Less Angry/ Frustrated

The grid is a very powerful tool that helps clients see how their thoughts cause their feelings. It becomes easy to show them how their not true self-talk leads to anger while true self-talk does not.

Move Away From Anger

Counselors often find, when working with anger issues, that clients choose anger rather than choosing to remain calm and assertive. When counselors find that this is the case, a movement exercise can demonstrate the choice that is being made. For example, a counselor writes, on a piece of paper, the word ANGER and tapes it to a chair to the right of the client. Then the counselor writes the word CALM on another piece of paper and tapes it to a chair to the left of the client. The counselor then engages the client in a discussion about how she has a choice of which seat to sit in and currently she is choosing the ANGER seat. The counselor helps the client understand the different self-talk from each of the seats. Clients often benefit from sitting in each of the two seats and saying the angry and non-angry thoughts from the respective seat. Clients frequently report that they never realized they had a choice and this visual representation assists in their understanding.

Counselor: (Counselor points to chair labeled CALM while client remains in seat labeled ANGER.) Why do you think, even though we have been working on this for some time, you continue to sit in this seat, when you know how to sit in that seat? (Counselor points to CALM seat.)

Client: I am not sure.

Counselor: Try this. Go sit in that seat. (Counselor motions for client to sit in the CALM seat; client moves.) How does that feel?

Client: It just feels not normal to me. It feels like I don't really know how to sit here, how to stay calm.

Counselor: Let's talk about that. You *do* have some ideas about how you can remain calm in tough situations, and yet it feels too uncomfortable to do it. As you sit there, think about what we can do to help you feel more comfortable in that seat.

This technique highlights that being angry is choice. This often helps clients to at least see that they don't have to be angry.

Empty Chair (Who do you think is making you angry?)

Drawing on a Gestalt type intervention, counselors may find that allowing clients to confront a person who they perceive is making them angry has positive effects. For example, a 40-year-old woman who is struggling with anger at her deceased mother may find that having the therapeutic experience of talking to her mother via the empty chair can be powerful.

Client: (Client speaks very angrily about her mother.) She was so awful and so selfish. She chose to have 3 kids—I didn't—but she left me to raise them and I was only 8!

Counselor: (Counselor sees that the woman is on the verge of rage.) Wait, wait, wait. I think what we need to do is work you through this anger. Let's start by expressing it as if she were here in this empty chair.

Client: (Client looks at the chair and starts to tear up.) Why did you do this to me! Why couldn't you have thought just once about me and not yourself! You were more worried about being alone but no, you sure could leave me alone to take care of the house. And what about all those nights I had to put everyone to bed when you didn't come home! I hate you! You ruined my life! I needed a mom! (Client starts to cry.)

Counselor: (Counselor sits in the empty chair and speaks with a kind, loving voice, knowing some of the background of the mom.) I'm so sorry. I was so wrong and so sick and so scared. Having you at age 16 was so hard on me. All I can say is I'm sorry. I wish I could make it up to you now but I'm gone. I hope you can get help from the counselor because I can't help you now. (Counselor moves out of the empty chair.)

Client: (Client looks up at the counselor, looking confused and empathetic.) I never thought of it from her perspective.

Counselor: Let's do that. Come sit in her seat.

Using the Gestalt technique of the empty chair can help clients gain perspective on their anger and on the situation that they think is causing them anger. It can be a very powerful technique for resolving anger in some clients.

Conclusion

Counselors often find that clients have trouble giving up their anger and often clients resist traditional interventions. Employing a multi-sensory, creative approach to working with clients who struggle with anger is an effective way to get concepts to stick with clients. The use of creative counseling techniques, such as the ones outlined in this article, can assist counselors in helping clients more clearly see their issues with anger and therefore aide in the helping process.

References

- Beaulieu, D. (2003, July/August). Beyond just words: Multisensory interventions can heighten therapy's impact. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 27(4), 69-77.
- Beck, R., & Fernandez, E. (1998). Cognitive-behavioral therapy in the treatment of anger: A meta-analysis. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, (22)1, 63-74.
- Blake, C. S., & Hamrin, V. (2007). Current approaches to the assessment and management of anger and aggression in youth: A review. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 20(4), 209-221.
- Casado-Kehoe, M., & Kehoe, M. P. (2007). Using genograms creatively to promote healthy lifestyles. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 2(4), 19-30.

- Deffenbacher, J. L., Oetting, E. R., Thwaites, G. A., Lynch, R. S., Baker, D. A., Stark, R. S., Thacker, S., & Eiswerth-Cox, L. (1996). State-trait anger theory and the utility of the trait anger scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 43(2), 131-148.
- Duffy, T. (2006/2007). Promoting relational competencies in counselor education through creativity and relational-cultural theory. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 2(1), 47-60.
- Ellis, A., & MacLaren, C. (1998). *Rational emotive behavior therapy: A therapist's guide*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact.
- Gladding, S. T. (1979). The creative use of poetry in the counseling process. *Personnel & Guidance Journal*, 57(6), 57-59.
- Gladding, S. T. (2005). *Counseling as an art: The creative arts in counseling* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Goldin, E., Bordan, T., Araoz, D. L., Gladding, S. T., Kaplan, D., Krumboltz, J., & Lazarus, A. (2006). Humor in counseling: Leader perspectives. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 84(4), 397-404.
- Haley, J. (1986). *Uncommon therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Jacobs, E. (1992). *Creative counseling techniques: An illustrated guide*. Odessa, FL: PAR.
- Jacobs, E. (1994). *Impact therapy*. Odessa, FL: PAR.
- Mosak, H. H., & Maniaci, M. P. (1998). *Tactics in counseling and psychotherapy*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- Murray, P. E. & Rotter, J. C. (2002). Creative counseling techniques for family therapists. *Family Journal*, 10(2), 203-206.
- Nickerson, E. T., & O'Laughlin, K. S. (1982). *Helping through action: Action oriented therapies*. Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press.
- Schimmel, C. J. (2007). Seeing is remembering: The impact of using creative props with children in schools and community agencies. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 2(2), 59-74.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm