



## Keep cool this Yule

### Don't lose your Christmas cheer this year

By Trevor Eddolls

The British Association of Anger Management is running National Anger Awareness Week during the first week of December this year. They also have some advice about 'keeping your cool this Yule'. And they feel that anger is an issue that isn't being addressed as fully as it should be. You may well be seeing clients with anger issues and so it will be useful to see what the experts have to say. And we might all benefit from staying cool during the festive period.

Anger is a very natural feeling. It's one of the ways that the primitive brain deals with continued (chronic) stress. It provides animals and people with an evolutionary advantage. When they're angry, they are stronger and are better able to defend their food and family – and so it is more likely that their genes will be passed on to the next generation. And appearing angry can act as a warning to others to modify their behaviour.

It's important to separate the feeling of being angry from any behaviour. While for our ancestors, anger would have given them an evolutionary advantage, bouts of anger today are usually inappropriate and can result in social exclusion. Let's recap how the brain works. There are three parts to the brain. The brain stem controls all those useful functions such as keeping your heart beating and ensuring you breathe. Your primitive brain (pretty much the limbic system) is a fast-acting part of your brain and ruled by emotions such as fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, surprise, and anger. And the third part (your cerebral cortex) is the slower intellectual brain, which is able to make logical decisions. When you're stressed, you're less able to use your intellectual brain and, eventually your primitive brain protects you with depression, anxiety, or anger.

It seems that during an angry episode, the left hemisphere is strongly activated, but not much happens in the right hemisphere. This gives you some logical ability, but no contextual ability. And that's why people do things that seem sensible to them at the time, but which later they come to bitterly regret.

Extreme anger can damage the heart and the immune system, whether it's released or repressed (even remembering times you felt very angry can be bad for your heart). Constantly releasing anger isn't good because the more you do something, the more likely you are to do it. So, you become more likely to respond to any situation by becoming angry.

A client seeing you with anger issues will find that they behave in a way that is unhelpful and destructive. And the anger is impacting on their overall mental and physical health. Your client may be outwardly aggressive, inwardly aggressive, or even passively aggressive.

Apart from on-going stress, people may get angry because they feel threatened or are attacked. They may be feeling frustrated or powerless. Or they may feel as if they're being treated unfairly or slighted in some way. They may fear that they have been abandoned or they may feel overwhelmed. Remember, it's not events themselves that affect us, it's how we interpret them. And so, people may treat events as being more threatening or more unfair than they might actually be.

#### The British Association of Anger Management (BAAM) conducted a survey that found:

- More than half of all Brits have family disagreements at Christmas.
- A quarter of all adults say their relationships with their partners come under pressure over the festive period, and an eighth say a festive argument made them want to split up.
- Calls to Relate go up – up 59% over Christmas.
- The average family has their first argument at 9.58am on Christmas Day morning.

#### They go on to suggest that the most likely reasons for increased anger over the festive period are:

- Who's doing the washing up.
- Spending more time with family than usual.
- Too much alcohol.
- Battles over the TV remote control.

And they suggest that almost a third of people choose to go for a walk to avoid rows.

#### BAAM have constructed a plan to help people avoid the stress, and associated anger. Starting with the pre-Christmas preparation, their advice is:

- Don't give yourself a hard time about making Christmas perfect – it's not all your responsibility and it is just one day in the year.
- Think about what sets you off and figure out in advance how you are going to deal with it. Plan ahead and think of the big picture (whatever the other person/thing does, it will all be over within a day/few days) and getting angry may not be worth the long-term effect. Think about the person who might make you angry: now write a list of their good points and think about the things you appreciate about that person (there is some good in all of us). Try to focus on those good things.



*The stress of the festive season can leave many feeling angry and overwhelmed.*

- Plan to share the responsibility for the day. Share out chores with the children and the other adults. Get some firm agreements on what each person will do, so the success of the day isn't on your shoulders entirely.
- Do as much as you can in advance.
- Agree beforehand with other family members some rules and arrangements that will help things go smoothly.

#### And on the days when you are celebrating Christmas:

- Listen carefully to what the other person is saying, and show you understand their point of view, even if you don't agree with it. Choose your words carefully: rather than saying "you always..." try saying "you sometimes...". Keep the volume down. Don't shout, speak. Don't argue, discuss.
- Don't drink too much – alcohol is responsible for lots of arguments, and it is more difficult to keep things in perspective when under the influence of drink. Drinking lowers your defences and changes your mood.
- Try not to tackle controversial matters over the phone, via e-mail, or texts. Body language and facial expressions are vital to appreciating the other person's point of view.
- Learn to break recurring conversations that always lead to an old argument. Take action and change the subject as smoothly as you can.
- Take deep breaths and count to 10 if you are getting frustrated. Think about the consequences and step back.
- If you feel yourself getting angry, take yourself out of the situation. If you can walk away and find a quiet place, or go for a walk, it will give you important time to calm and think about the bigger picture. Tell people you're going for a walk because you have eaten a lot, not because you need to escape.
- Remember if you shout, it's likely your children will shout back at you.

- You only have to ... eat sprouts/speak to your uncle/say thanks for an unwanted present/(add your own option here), just for the day to make the festivities flow smoothly.
- Accept the inevitable (e.g. there will be a mess/your mother-in-law will say something you don't like etc.) and try not to argue over smaller things.
- Look for the positives – seeing family/friends, the memories the children will have of happy Christmases, and the meal itself, which research says is the most enjoyable part of Christmas for many people.

#### For young people, BAAM suggest:

- Try to get enough rest before Christmas day. Tiredness makes everyone grumpy.
- If you get over-excited or if someone's annoying you, walk away and find a quiet place to calm down.
- If your siblings are annoying you, tell a grown-up who isn't too busy.
- You may find listening to your favourite music or repeating a calm word to yourself while breathing deeply, will help you avoid the angry outburst.

#### Lastly, BAAM informs us that managing anger is a primary key to controlling stress, anxiety, and depression. Their final list of rules to beat anger says:

- STOP, think, take a look at the big picture.
- It's OK to have a different opinion.
- Listen actively.
- Use your emotional support network – what they call anger buddies.
- Keep an anger management journal.
- Don't take things personally.

#### So, what happens in the brain when we get angry?

The amygdala identifies anything that threatens us. It can do this based on messages from the senses that have passed through the thalamus (where most nerves end in the brain) or from the right prefrontal cortex (where we relive events that happened previously and imagine what might happen in the future). Neurons from the amygdala alert the hypothalamus that there is danger and it (the hypothalamus) produces vasopressin (a hormone), which stimulates the pituitary gland to produce ACTH (adrenocorticotropic

hormone), which, in turn, stimulates the adrenal gland to produce cortisol (often called the stress hormone). In addition, the hypothalamus causes sympathetic nerves to stimulate the adrenal gland to produce adrenalin and noradrenalin. Like everything in the limbic system, this happens very quickly. Less speedy is the intellectual brain's ability to check that the primitive brain has reacted appropriately.

As a person becomes angry, their muscles tense up. Catecholamines (neurotransmitters) are released making a person feel like they have a surge of energy, which they can use to take immediate protective action. Other changes from the adrenalin are increased heart rate, raised blood pressure, and an increase in respiration rate. A person's face may go red as more blood goes from their GI tract to their limbs ready to fight or run. Their attention narrows and becomes fixed onto the target of their anger.

The left prefrontal cortex can turn off emotions like anger and can reduce angry feelings. One way to ensure this can happen is to be more relaxed. Even so, it can take a while for the adrenalin that was released into the blood stream to get used up and so a person can get quickly irritated by something else. Anger also affects memory. High levels of arousal make it difficult for new memories to be formed. That's why people find it hard to remember exactly what happened during an angry episode.

#### What can we, as Solution Focused Hypnotherapists, do to help our clients?

The obvious things are to help them empty their stress buckets and get them into their intellectual brains. This means helping them to get enough effective sleep and helping them to relax, as well as encouraging them to notice good things, not just bad ones (focusing on the 3Ps!) – all things we would do in our regular sessions.

We can also use the miracle question to encourage a client to start thinking about how they would like to behave. Sometimes, the miracle question is the first time that they have ever thought about behaving in a different way – and how that different behaviour can affect the people around them. We can also take their new ways of behaving and use that as a kind of reframe/

**Remember, it's not events themselves that affect us, it's how we interpret them.**

rehearsal to use with them on the couch. That allows them to 'practice' their new behaviour and start firing those neurons together.

If you are seeing any clients who are not looking forward to Christmas, then there are some very useful ideas in BAAM's pack. In fact, we might all find something to make our Christmases less stressful and the fun events that they should be. And there are useful ideas we can pass on to our clients... at any time of the year.

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