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Reflections on participant change during a mindfulness based anger management programme.

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Abstract
Most anger management group programmes utilise Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness Based Treatments (MBT’s) in their interventions. This study uses Transactional Analysis and mindfulness for the management of anger and explores how participants report phenomenological change throughout a 10-week programme. The research examines participants weekly ‘check-ins’ as they reflected on their angry behaviours, interpersonal relationships and the development of mindfulness techniques as a way to regulate their angry emotions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to help provide insight of the ‘check-in’ narratives. The research suggests participants who are able to create structure for their mindfulness practice seem more able to reduce their angry behaviours even in the face of quite chaotic inter and intra-personal experiences.

Keywords: Transactional Analysis, Mindfulness, Anger Management, Groups, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Word Count: 4775

Introduction
Anger management group programmes have mostly utilised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness Based Treatments (MBT’s) for at least the past 30 years (Fix & Fix, 2013; Deffenbacher J. L., 2011). Kassinove & Sukhodolsky (1995, p. 11) define anger as a transient, complex emotional process incorporating both ‘uncomfortable… experiences and… cognitions’ together with ‘automotive [bodily] reactions’ in the enactment of socially unacceptable displays of behaviour. When individuals become angry they tend to experience thoughts and triggering events which lead to phenomenological experiences that activate the fight-or-flight (sympathetic) response. This combination of events results in expressions of anger through verbal and/or physical actions (Eckhardt, Norlander, & Deffenbacher, 2004).

Although CBT and MBT anger interventions are popular in the treatment of anger there are few alternative interventions available to the researcher or the therapist. There are even less interventions which stray away from the use of quantitative outcome measures and there are no studies exploring how participants on anger management programmes report their changing phenomenological experience over time. It is important for researchers to be able to understand the qualitative process of change as this knowledge has the potential to provide a wider range of interventions for practitioners to adopt in the future. Additionally, the reliance quantitative measures of individuals completing anger management programmes tends to obscure the finer points of the human experience and ‘miss’ the qualitative detail hidden within (Eckhardt, Norlander, & Deffenbacher, 2004).
In 2013 the author developed a 10-week psychoeducational anger management group programme which combined Transactional Analysis (Stewart & Joines, 2012) and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The programme which has run regularly since 2013, has proved effective in lowering participant’s angry responses and helped reduce clients close interpersonal conflict. The group runs for two hours per week and typically has around seven participants. Each participant undergoes an assessment before joining the group to establish their suitability for this type of anger management work.

Mindfulness is an approach loosely based on Buddhist meditative practices and was initially introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) as a method to treat chronic pain. The approach requires participants to focus their attention on their phenomenological experience whilst adopting a non-judgemental attitude to the experiences that arise (Bishop, Lau, & Shapiro, 2004). The programme incorporates mindfulness interventions based on the growing evidence suggesting mindfulness practice may help reduce anger and aggression in a range of clients (Robins, Keng, Ekblad, & Brantley, 2012).

Throughout the 10 weeks, participants learn elements of Transactional Analysis theory and are given practical ways of reducing their anger based on mindfulness principles. Each week participants are introduced to a mindfulness or deep breathing exercise by the course facilitator and are instructed to carry out these exercises as ‘homework’ for seven days until the group meets again. The ability to perform mindfulness homework practice in a regular uninterrupted way throughout the course helps to create structure for the participant and is the basis of all Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programmes (Santorelli, Meleo-Meyer, & Koerbel, 2017).

At the beginning of each session, group members ‘check-in’ and reflect upon how their week has been in terms of their anger, the success of their homework and the state of their interpersonal relationships. Each group member spends around 10 minutes checking-in and receives support and encouragement from other members of the group when this is appropriate. This study explored the check-ins and changing experiences over the lifetime of an anger management of three group members- Peter, Andy and Stuart.

Method

Research design

The research was carried out with the approval and to the standards required of the York St John ethics committee and in adherence with Bond’s (2004) Ethical guidelines for researching counselling and psychotherapy. At each session the facilitator recorded the participants check-in using an electronic voice recorder. The recordings were later transcribed in preparation for data analysis. The data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is a flexible, iterative qualitative approach to analysis which aims to explore the way in which participants make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009).

It is typical for members of any anger management group to have a long history of angry behaviours and to experience severe interpersonal difficulties. Participants joining an anger
management programme are provided with an opportunity to alter their experiences of themselves and others and to change their reactions to anger-triggering events. IPA is a useful analytical tool in this respect as it can help ‘track’ the changes participants describe over time from the more chronic levels of anger and aggression to the more acceptable experiences of living in the world free from anger.

The IPA interpretations employed a ‘double hermeneutic’ approach which attempts to make sense of the group members own sense making efforts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The process started at the data gathering stage where the researcher attempted to understand the participant’s frame of reference at check-in by asking probing questions and seeking clarification, when necessary on some of the statements participants made. At the analysis stage a reflective processes sought to highlight metaphors within the language in order to help surface the presence of a participant’s unconscious ideas.

Data analysis

IPA employs a set of common processes including ‘moving from the descriptive to the interpretive’ along with a ‘commitment to an understanding of the participant’s point of view’ as an aid to sense making (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009, p. 79). In order to work within this process a number of methodological steps were followed (Figure 1.). The transcripts were first read and re-read a number of times in order to engage more deeply with the participant’s experience (each participant had 10 transcripts corresponding to their weekly check-in).

The initial noting stage was the most time-consuming element of data analysis as it took time for the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual ideas to emerge from each participant’s account. After this phase was completed the data seemed more comprehensive and varied. In the next stage of the IPA process a link was made between the participants separate experiences in order to create a number of emergent themes.

At the end of this process there were 10 emerging corresponding and diverging themes which eventually condensed down to a cluster of five themes (1. The initial check-in 2. Cycles of behaviour 3. Use of mindfulness techniques 4. Use of breathing techniques 5. Participant endings). Finally the themes were compared to help identify larger patterns across the data in order to try to make sense of the major and minor narratives throughout the participant’s 10-week anger management experience.

In the following section the results of the IPA process will be analysed using data from three participants, Peter, Andy and Stewart.
Results

1. The initial check-in

Peter a 26-year-old unemployed man, joined the anger management course in the hope of managing a self-destructive anger cycle.

’I shout at mainly my mum and dad, ’cos they’re the ones who are there... if no-one’s there I might try and do stupid things which I don’t really agree to... I’ve self-harmed one time last year a couple of months ago as well I tried taking an overdose with my depression tablets, one time ... I tried hanging myself’
Peter’s anger seems to be initially directed at his parents, but his anger quickly becomes internalised in uncontrollable ways through acts of attempted suicide and self-harm. Peter acknowledges the uncontrollable aspect of his anger as he reveals he does not ‘really agree to’ the actions he takes. Peter’s check-in seems to reflect a split-off element of his self which often acts against his better judgement.

Andy is 54 and describes how external events seem to trigger his anger.

‘some things just set you off and then all of a sudden it becomes tit-for-tat and it just builds up and up and up... shouting and screaming, banging things, and then you blow yourself out and at that point you look around you and just ...not physical devastation but mental devastation and everybody is being mentally scarred by it’

Andy’s experience of his own anger has connotations to the levels of aggression experienced in wartime. Before conflict the aggressor increases the tension and rhetoric by ‘shouting and screaming’ which suddenly transforms itself into violent, explosive acts. In keeping with this theme, when peace returns Andy describes witnessing the aftermath of his anger and surveying the landscape of devastation and the post traumatic mental health impact war brings. Andy distances himself from his acts through the use of language where he employs both the second and third person, but no first person descriptive. This may suggest how Andy creates a defensive barrier between himself and his actions which helps to keep his experience and his responsibility separate.

Stewart is 30, married with an 18-month-old child. He has joined the programme to resolve the anger and resentment he feels for his wife.

‘I find myself just bickering, for no reason, it could be the fact that my wife once called the film that we were watching the wrong name, it's really silly... afterwards I'll end up just festering on it like "why did I do that?"'

Stewart’s anger seems to embody an air of superiority and an underlying bullying tone as he ‘chips away’ at the minor discrepancies in his wife’s language. In this account there is a sense that the angry process happens to him and is not initiated by him with the statements ‘I find myself...’ and ‘I end up...’ Afterwards Stewart turns his anger inward as he ‘festers’ on the pettiness of his criticality. There are no self-harm marks on Stewart’s body, but the effect of his internalised anger may be just as scarring.

2. Cycles of behaviour

There were some themes participants often returned to at their check-in. One of the themes Peter returned to was the way in which his anger lead him to become depressed and finally to self-harm.

‘I just think all I do is self-harm, all I do is drink, all I do is shout. It just builds up ... I was thinking about my past like the self-harming, the drinking, just everything that started getting me more and more p***** off, so actually I grabbed a knife and actually clenched my fist just so I could actually see my veins.’
As Peter reveals his thoughts to the group he reflects upon, possibly for the first time how his criticism leads to more anger and the re-enactment of his self-harming cycle. There seems to be a certain sense of defiance in Peter’s description of his clenched fist and raised veins, as if he is taunting the split-off part of his self to dare test his resolve and engage in the familiar self-harming ritual once again. It is possible Peter views his body as a separate entity, distinct and alienated from himself, almost mirroring his own feelings in the moment. On this occasion, and on many others throughout his time on the programme Peter refrained from self-harming and appropriately managed the anger he felt.

Andy described his anger in many ways including through the metaphor of a hurricane.

‘you go up this hill and when you burn yourself out, you get the other side and it’s like a hurricane has gone through, you’ve just destroyed everything and you think, I wish I could put it back together and you can see the kids... it’s sort of papered over but things ain’t right, you think, oh you just feel so guilty cause you’re destroying that kid’s future’

Andy’s description of his anger has a violent air. The hurricane going uphill rips through everything in its path, pulling buildings and trees away from their foundations and upwards into the air. Once again Andy’s distancing language protects him from responsibility as he describes his experience as a process that almost ‘happens to’ him. After the hurricane passes Andy attempts to rebuild his damaged relationships and ‘paper over the cracks’ of his wrath, which he now realises is not enough. By reflecting on his behaviour and sharing with the group his guilt, the possibility of change has the opportunity to emerge from the devastation.

Stewart’s check-ins reflected the difficulty he had in curtailing his critical thoughts.

‘I’m picking up on things that are pointless, you know it’s the fact that she cuts a sandwich in triangles and I cut it in squares with the crusts off because he [their child] doesn’t like it but she hands it to him and he eats it anyway’

Although Stewart realises the ‘pointlessness’ of his critical thoughts he seems unable to stop them. A continuing theme in Stewart’s check-ins is the way in which the minutiae of his wife’s actions become the focus of his criticism. This criticism seems to quickly ‘rebound’ back onto Stewart in the form of ‘festerering’ ruminations. ‘He doesn’t like it but she hands it to him and he eats it anyway’ seems to metaphorically underline the hopelessness of Stewarts recent anger management attempts.

3. Use of mindfulness techniques

After a few weeks Peter reflects on his success with using the ‘clouds in the sky’ mindfulness exercise (see Appendix 1).

‘I went back to the clouds in the sky actually, it’s just amazing I mean that one I prefer, it’s my favourite one if I’m honest cause I feel like that I can actually hear the
Peter seems amazed at the strength of his imagination and the way in which he can transport himself to a different place in his mind’s eye. He can intuitively visualise a scene, hear sounds within the scene and feel the temperature difference as he undergoes a new kind of phenomenological experience. Peter’s visualisations transmit elements of hope in the realisation of the positive power of this type of mindfulness exercise. Where once Peter used his powerful imagination to criticise and catastrophise his situation, he has now discovered how ‘clouds in the sky’ can help him escape the grip of his angry and self-defeating feelings.

In a later check-in Andy reports the ease of his body scan and deep breathing practice, whilst reporting how a less structured mindfulness exercise causes some difficulty.

‘I’ve found the body scan dead easy I enjoyed that. I find the one from last week a lot harder the ‘accepting who you are’ one, that I find -I don’t know- painful in some way I don’t really know why … it’s just taking your mind sometimes to where you don’t want to be’

Andy seems to enjoy a mindfulness practice with structure but is much less comfortable when he is invited to ‘accept’ himself within an unstructured exercise (see Appendix 1). Andy seems puzzled that the act of simply accepting himself seems painful as it takes his thoughts to places he does not wish to visit. It could be that when Andy engages in the process of accepting himself as he is, he encounters painful thoughts and ideas which are usually suppressed but which ‘leak’ into his awareness when his mental structure becomes less rigid.

If we consider the way in which Andy distances and protects himself from the responsibility of his actions, the unstructured mindfulness practice may inadvertently lower his psychological ability to use this defence. With a lowered defence, past memories of angry incidents would be free to enter Andy’s conscious awareness. These memories could provide a new perspective on Andy’s behaviour suggesting him to be the initiator of the psychological harm his family experience. This process of realisation would certainly be very uncomfortable for someone with such a distancing defence structure and would itself need to be defended against very quickly.

By week three Stewart reveals he is struggling to create structure for his practice.

‘Yeah I’m gonna have to try harder but I think it was initially the first one that put me off … until my child goes to bed I don’t get the time to shut off and then generally I try and spend some time with the missus … but I think I’m just gonna need some time’

Stewart’s check-in has an air of defensiveness as he resolves to the group to ‘try harder’. There seems to be several factors preventing Stewart from carrying out the mindful practice including being ‘put off’ by the mindfulness activity itself, his child’s bedtime routine, the
management of his leisure time and the attention he needs to show his wife. Trying harder to create a structure within such a busy life seems an incredibly difficult task for Stewart to achieve. It may be Stewart’s phenomenological experience of his first mindfulness breathing practice, where he became dizzy and light headed could have affected his confidence in the techniques themselves. Alternatively, it may be that the mindfulness practice itself forced Stewart to contemplate himself in new ways for the first time. In contemplating himself, Stewart may have discovered aspects of his self which he did not actually like. Coming face-to-face with himself for the first time like this may have been an unsettling, terrifying experience for Stewart and one he does not wish to particularly experience again.

4. Use of breathing techniques

By week four Andy reports having great success with his deep breathing practice.

‘I just felt like you’re walking on clouds and I just felt so happy and I thought this is better than taking drugs and I really enjoyed that feeling I’ve never felt so calm for such a long time and I just want to get back there again’

Andy’s check-in has a ‘lightness’ to it and is reminiscent of the late 1960s and times of ‘flower power’ and ‘free love’. As he connects with his joy, maybe Andy recalls more carefree times before the responsibilities which marriage and parenthood would bring. This pivotal breathing experience is the one which helps Andy establish a strong and structured daily practice throughout the rest of the course.

In week five Peter reports that technology is assisting his breathing practice.

‘I downloaded a new app -it’s called calm- it’s amazing, it’s just soothing sounds you can listen to if you’re angry … it gives you breathing examples … I enjoy it’

There is also a lightness to Peter’s check-in as he shares his technological discovery with the group. Peter uses the words calm, amazing and soothing in the same sentence, maybe in an effort to show other members of the group a different way to access the mindfulness exercises. It is clear from this check-in that Peter has embraced his positivity and is now freely exploring a wider range of phenomenological experiences to help with his anger management efforts.

In the same week Stewart checks-in that he continues to experience difficulty with his breathing practice.

‘I struggled to concentrate and feeling dizzy as well… I was travelling back and I don’t know if it was the train or anything but I just didn’t try because I didn’t want to risk it on a train … yeah I’m struggling to find the space and time’

Stewart continues to report finding the breathing practice problematic as he experiences difficulty with his concentration and with the dizziness which seems to be ever present. Stewart cannot remember where he carried out his most recent breathing exercise and reports making no attempt to engage with his practice as he seems fearful of the
consequences. Along with his cautious approach to the breathing exercises, Stewart continues to find it difficult in creating a regular structure to mindfulness practice. This impedes his progress on tackling the relational anger he wished to work on when he joined the programme. Maybe Stewart is building more effective unconscious defences to guard against coming face-to-face with his real self once again, a tactic which helps defend against reality but which does nothing to help manage his continuing anger.

5. Participant endings

At the conclusion of the anger management course Peter checks-in that he has begun to view himself and his anger differently. He is much more positive, has begun to develop his CV and has applied for a job. Peter’s relationship with his father seems to be improving as they are now spending much more time together ‘bonding’, whilst he is more quickly able to reconcile angry outbursts with his mother.

‘On Monday I had an outburst, it was over something stupid though, me and my mum had an argument, so I went upstairs just listened to about 10 minutes of music, just to relax, so I calmed down, I came downstairs and apologised for how I acted’

By week 10 Andy shares with the group that he has started to use the empathic skills he learned on the course with his wife. This relationship remains the most challenging area of his life since his children no longer stand in the path of ‘the hurricane’.

Like Peter, Andy is now more reflective about his behaviour and apologises to his wife much more often than he used to.

‘I tried initiating empathy and that didn’t go well, I tried it on Saturday as things had boiled over and I lost my temper and I was cross with myself for losing my temper, so I apologised you know, and backed down … I know I need to go back there but it’s, it’s going to make the Northern Ireland peace talks look like a piece of cake.’

Stewart chose to leave the group in week seven citing growing work pressures which preventing him from continuing. It is disappointing that Stewart was unable to create a structure for his practice and as a consequence, was unable to tackle his relationship anger. Stewart represents only a small number of participants who enrol on the anger management group but, for a number of reasons do not finish the course.

Discussion and conclusion

Discussion

This study explored participants weekly check-ins as they reflected on their angry behaviour, interpersonal relationships and mindfulness practice. The group relationships were highly collegiate and supportive with participants gaining the trust and confidence of their peers to share thoughts and ideas never normally revealed and often never even considered.
The study successfully utilised IPA as a way of exploring the groups changing experience and is the first idiographic study of its kind within the mindfulness anger management literature. In carrying out research using this method, the author hopes to help other researchers understand and appreciate the participant experience in a new way (Deffenbacher & McKay, 2000). The IPA methodology itself was chosen in response to criticisms to quantitative studies that use psychometric measures of anger that bear poor relation to one another, often with questionable validity. IPA offers the possibility to assist researchers in understanding the process of change within quite a complex programme (Biaggio, 1980; Biaggio, Supplee, & Curtis, 1981; Deffenbacher J. L., 2006).

This analysis allowed insight into group member’s phenomenological experiences of themselves. Particularly powerful was the description of Peter’s internalised ruminations and self-harm which seemed to be split-off from his awareness. Another interesting element to the study was the way in which Andy seemed to distance himself from his angry actions at check-in and utilise second and third person voices to ‘inoculate’ himself from responsibility for the damage he was inflicting on his family.

It was interesting to note the way participants reported experiences of their mindfulness practice. Peter’s engagement with the ‘clouds in the sky’ exercise suggested he had discovered a new way to interact with his destructive, split-off self. The visualisations moved Peter away from his regular fantasies of non-achievement and destruction to more positive visualisations of contentment and hope.

The study also demonstrated that not all mindfulness exercises were suitable for everyone. Although Andy seemed to enjoy structured mindfulness, the process of accepting himself in the moment seemed to be very problematic, as his lowered defences allowed too much access to denied thoughts. Stewart too found problems with his mindfulness practice which seemed to stem from the way in which he had created a busy lifestyle for himself, possibly as a defence against engaging with his own experience of his real self. In terms of breathing exercises, both Peter and Andy’s check-ins underline the opportunity for engagement with breathwork when a suitable technique and an appropriate practice combine. It is clear in both cases that both Peter and Andy benefitted from the conjunction of technique and practice as they were able to incorporate a full programme of mindful breathing into their 10-week course.

Many researchers link the reduction of angry affect to the ability to structure mindfulness into a regular daily routine. Participants able to achieve routine reportedly have the ability to put their experiences into a more realistic perspective and increase their reflective ability (Feldman, Greeson, & Senville, 2010; Siegel, 2007).

Stewart was the only participant to find the breathing and mindfulness practice a struggle. One of the reasons for this may have been an initially uncomfortable experience of mindful breathing which led to his reluctance to carry out more exercises at home. A further factor in Stewart’s reported problems was almost certainly the fast-paced lifestyle he was living which seemed to prevent him from ‘setting down the roots’ of his practice in the first few weeks.
It may be, of course that the mindfulness practice Stewart engaged in provided an opportunity for him to still his mind and contemplate his ‘real self’ for a while. This may have been too much for Stewart to deal with as he realised how his seemingly uncontrollable actions were affecting both himself and his close family. Stewart almost immediately became quite defended against using the mindfulness exercises, which seemed to only add to his anxiety and stress.

Stewart’s example underlines the importance of creating a structured practice which can help participants regulate their emotions. It also indicates that participants who engage in mindfulness anger management programmes should be ‘in the right place’ emotionally to be able to work with mindfulness techniques.

Interestingly, this corresponds to findings from brain research suggesting a link between regular mindful practice and an increased activity in brain regions used to cope with stressful or negative situations (Cahn & Polich, 2006). Both Peter and Andy reported much reduced anger, improved personal relationships and a more reflective attitude to their phenomenological experience. Although both participants still reported angry outbursts, these seem to be much less frequent and much less intense than at the beginning of the programme (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004).

Conclusion

Although this study is ideographic and focuses on three group members, it is broadly representative of the issues many members of anger management groups present and groups in which the author has facilitated. In most groups for instance, there are often people who communicate their anger through some form of addictive or self-harming behaviour. Other group members may have anger related diagnoses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or a Personality Disorder (PD).

In every group there are, unfortunately a few participants who are unable to create a structure to their daily practice and struggle to manage their anger effectively. It is common that these group members leave the programme when they realise their commitment to the process is not strong enough to achieve the behavioural changes they desire. Within all of the groups the author has facilitated over the past five years, it is reassuring to note that most participants are able to reduce their angry behaviour substantially. Almost all participants are able to access group support, reflect and learn from their experiences. Mostly all group members are able to create and maintain the required mindfulness and breathing practice throughout the 10-week programme, which helps reduce their angry outbursts.

Practical implications

Group check-ins are an invaluable method of helping participants reflect on their experiences in the days between their group sessions. Check-ins provide the space for connections between group members to develop and for group members themselves to air their thoughts to a sympathetic audience. Group members carrying out daily ‘homework’ sessions utilise the check-in process as a way to help reflect on their progress and as an
encouragement which helps create the structure required to lower their impulsiveness and challenge their angry behaviours. Practitioners running mindfulness based, impulse control focused groups should consider how they can incorporate the reflective group check-in into their sessions and how this may assist group members in their efforts.

Notes on contributor
Dr. Gary Shepherd is a lecturer, researcher and psychotherapeutic counsellor. He has interests in anger management, group work and borderline personality disorder using an approach known as Transference Focused Psychotherapy (TFP).

Conflict of interest
The author reports no conflict of interest

Role of funding
This research received no funding

Acknowledgements
With thanks to Sinead Tingley, Molly Leigh and Joshua Swaine for their support in the development of this article.
Appendix 1

*Nbreathing and Mindfulness Exercises*

Deep breathing #1: Introducing diaphragmatic breathing
Deep breathing #2: Blending diaphragmatic breathing with relaxation
Describing mindfulness: Holding an object and describing its attributes
Mindful body scan: Concentrating on individual parts of the body
Accept yourself: Allowing experiences to arise in the moment without judgement
Observing mindfulness: Looking at an image without judgement
Clouds in the sky: Creative visualisation
Participating mindfulness: Concentrating attention on one particular activity
Mindful walking: Walking slowly and deliberately
References


