

## **Managing Client Anger: Stages, Strategies & Skills**

### **Introduction:**

Commonly, clients respond with anger to the involvement of the child welfare system. Anger may be a secondary emotion masking client feelings of surprise and fear, or it may be a tactic to put off the worker and avoid further worker contact. When encountering client anger during an interview, our goal is to achieve a level of self-control that allows us to form a response and act in a manner consistent with the mission and values of child welfare while ensuring our safety and the safety of our clients. Workers need to know how to manage client anger, and manage their own anger when they encounter opposition from clients. The content below reveals the anger event in outline form.

### **Anger Pre-event:**

We enter any event or situation with our own personal mental, emotional, and behavioral make-up or style. Our anger predisposition is our anger style. Our anger style is made of our beliefs as well as our typical affective and behavioral responses influenced by genetics and life experience. Our anger style is both our typical response style and our specific disposition or mood just prior to the moment we encounter an anger challenge.

### **Anger Event Stages:**

#### **1. Engagement Stage:**

- Engage the client.
- Experience the angry client behavior.
- Face our initial physical and affective reaction (fight-flight-freeze).

#### **2. Containment Stage:**

- Manage the initial physical/affective reaction.
- Orient ourselves to respond.

#### **3. Safety Stage: (maintained throughout the event)**

- Identify the risk of harm to our client or ourselves.
- Respond to the risk of harm by leaving or continuing.

#### **4. De-escalation Stage:**

- Accurately reflect client feelings.
- Identify the source of the person's angry feelings.
- Validate those source feelings as "normal" (if they are).
- Use "I" Messages.
- Offer a mini-timeout.

#### **5. Resolution Stage:**

- Help move the client to identify his/her goals or outcomes.
- Help the client to choose a positive outcome.
- Help the person begin to develop a constructive plan of action.

#### **6. Post-Event Stage:**

- Debrief the client by reviewing the process and outcomes.
- Identify the knowledge/awareness/skills used and learned.
- Identifying new knowledge/skill needs.
- Document everything.
- Cognitively and effectively, let go of the event.

## **Managing Client Anger: Stages, Strategies & Skills (cont'd)**

While we describe the above phases in a linear sequence, in practice, the order and duration of a phase may vary according to each situation. The safety phase is active throughout the anger event. An anger event may be one encounter or a series of anger “brushfires” in which an anger flare-up occurs, as well as de-escalation and partial resolution followed by another flare-up. Thus, some phases may repeat, be sustained, or may overlap.

### **Strategies & Skills Useful in Managing Client Anger**

#### **Preliminary Phase:**

- Tuning into Self – The worker’s own tendencies in responding to anger, i.e. flight, fight, freeze
- Tuning into Others – Become familiar with available client history regarding client needs, issues, and ways of expressing anger; in addition, consider the impact of the issues the worker expects to present in the upcoming interview
- Tuning into the Environment – Anticipate what potential dangers might be present in the interview setting, i.e. characteristics of the environment, likelihood of the availability of weapons to the client
- Clarity about the Purpose and Outcomes – Clarify what the goals the worker expects to achieve, especially those that the worker cannot compromise, i.e. those related to child safety.
- Provision for Support – Helps to increase worker confidence
- Rehearsal of Anger Management Skills – Offers a chance for workers to rehearse the anger management skills they may need to use

#### **Beginning/Engagement Phase:**

- Tuning into Self – Awareness and control of feelings as the client expresses anger
- Tuning into the Environment – Paying attention to the presence of potential or actual threats to safety in the interview environment
- Safety Decision – Deciding to continue or terminate the interview based on safety
- Focused Listening – Paying attention to the feelings and content behind the feeling being expressed by the client
- Displaying Understanding of the Client’s Feelings – Also display reasons for those feelings – example: “You’re very upset about having your visit with your son cancelled” (note: do not say, “I understand how you feel;” instead, say, “I can see why you might feel that way.”)
- Brief Summarization – Summarize your understanding of the client’s issues and feelings. Summarization is useful as a way of generating a pause in the escalation of anger. In addition, if a client feels understood, the client may begin to calm down. Example: “Let me see if I correctly understand you. You are upset that someone cancelled your visit with your son. You do not know why. You wasted a vacation day from work, and now you do not know if someone will reschedule the visit. Is that correct?” – (summarizing and reaching for feedback).

## **Managing Client Anger: Stages, Strategies & Skills (cont'd)**

- **Interruption** – If the client is not letting the worker speak and summarize, the worker interrupts the client using one of the following strategies:
  - “Mr. Smith, what you are saying is very important. Let me interrupt you for a minute to be sure that I understand what you are telling me so far.”
  - If the client continues on, the worker says, “Mr. Smith, I’ve respected you by listening carefully to what you say. Now, I need you to listen for a minute so that we can be sure we are on the same page about this issue.”
- **Slow Down the Pace** – Slow the interview and increase calming opportunity by pausing to write down the key points of the summary. “Mr. Smith, I want to be sure I don’t forget these key points so I’m going to quickly write them down.”
- **Re-Direction** – “Mr. Smith, I can see that you are still very angry. What do you do to calm yourself down when you feel this way?” If the client can describe his/her methods, the worker attempts to give time/space for the client to use personal strategies, such as smoking a cigarette, stepping outside, calling a friend or clergy person, etc.
- **Timeout** – The worker increases structure by calling a timeout. Note, “I can see you are too angry to talk with me right now, so let’s take a five to ten minute break, and then try again to work this out.”
- **Terminate Interview** – If a timeout is unsuccessful and/or the worker believes he or she is not safe, the worker terminates the interview or arranges for police or security to be present.
- **Ask What the Client Wants** – Once the client has de-escalated enough to be able to interact with the worker to allow summarization of the issues, the worker thanks the client for calming down and asks the client what it is that the client wants, i.e. what would be a satisfactory outcome for the client.
- **The Worker Listens Carefully** – The worker does so without making any judgments about the client’s desired outcome.
- **“How to” and Commitment Check** – The worker asks the client how the client thinks that they might achieve the desired outcome; what the client might be willing to do and what the client thinks the agency and the worker might do.

At this point, the worker accomplished de-escalation. The worker and client move into the contracting and work phase of the interview. If client anger should flair-up again, the worker reverts to using the above strategies and skills until the client sufficiently calms down enough to continue the interview; or, the worker terminates the interview.

While active client anger is often the most stressful for the worker, the client may also express passive anger. Clients may express anger passively because they lack skill in appropriately asserting themselves or learned that openly expressing anger may bring reprisal. This type of client’s goal is to experience a sense of control by frustrating the attempts of others they perceive as more powerful and trying to exert control.

## **Managing Client Anger: Stages, Strategies & Skills (cont'd)**

The worker should avoid becoming frustrated or acting on that frustration in a punitive way. The worker should avoid asking “why” questions when the client fails to meet expectations. Instead, the worker should focus on “how” and “when” the client will do what the agency requires and help the client move forward in small steps. The trainer will revisit, and share opportunities for practice, at other points in the training, the concept of the application of skills useful in managing active and passive client anger.

Like our clients, we are not perfect. Sometimes the worker allow him or herself to get caught up in the anger event, may personalize the client’s anger and comments, and may respond ineffectively or inappropriately. If this situation occurs, at the next interview opportunity, the worker might review with the client what went wrong, should apologize if necessary, attempt to repair the collaborative/protective partnership, and find a better resolution of the conflict with the client.

