A group program for aggression control

Centre for Clinical Interventions
in collaboration with YouthLink*

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au

* YouthLink is a state-wide service administered through the Inner City Mental Health Service of Royal Perth Hospital in Western Australia. YouthLink targets at-risk young people aged 13 to 25 who have difficulty in accessing more mainstream mental health services.
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INTRODUCTION

AGGRESSION IN YOUNG PEOPLE

The effect of aggressive behaviour on young people and others in their lives can be far-reaching. Aggressive behaviour may jeopardise employment status, family and other relationships as well as physical and emotional well-being. The cost to the community can be high through damage to property, days of work lost and through the physical and emotional harm which is inflicted.

There is no clear cause of aggression among young people, with a number of factors likely to be playing a role. Some sources cite the role of endemic violence portrayed through the media, and a peer culture which reinforces violence as ‘cool’ (Rose, 1998). However, specific variables such as parent modelling of aggression are, in many instances, clearly influential. For example, the young person may have witnessed aggression and violence within the family and learned that these are acceptable ways of dealing with conflict. In these cases, in addition to the modelling influence, the young person may lack prosocial skills. For other young people a dysfunctional family context can result in a sense of powerlessness with aggression being a means of asserting control. Broadly, aggression can be both proactive and reactive (Fuller, 1999; Rose, 1998). Aggression is proactive when it is designed to have needs and wants met. Reactive aggression is that which occurs as a response to a particular triggering event. Aggression can be verbal, physical and/or sexual.

Typically, young people referred to YouthLink for aggression are experiencing a range of problems, and aggression or ‘anger outbursts’ is only a part of the picture. However, the aggressive behaviour often precipitates the referral because of its ‘visibility’ and the impact it has on the young person and others in his/her life. On referral to YouthLink the young person is always first allocated an individual counsellor. Group therapy will be considered when the young person has recognised that aggression is a problem and has indicated some degree of motivation to change.

‘Getting Along & Keeping Cool’ is a skills-based group program which allows the young person to learn and practice the skills needed for aggression control. Individual therapy sessions are usually continued while the young person is completing the group. If the presenting issues are particularly complex, individual sessions may be used to deal with other issues of concern to the young person. Learning aggression control skills in a group setting has the advantage over individual treatment in being able to use the group process to learn alternative ways of re-
sponding to conflict and in its provision of a supportive and motivating group environment in which to change.

The ‘Getting Along & Keeping Cool’ group program is based on Novaco’s (1975) cognitive-behavioural model of anger and aggression. It recognises that the emotion of anger is usually a response to a specific trigger which is mediated by the person’s beliefs and expectations about the situation. Along with the emotion of anger is an adrenalin-based physiological reaction. An aggressive response, along with the physical tension, usually leads to an escalation of the triggering event and the associated thoughts and angry feelings. In the program it is also recognised that alongside or underlying the feeling of anger may be other feelings such as humiliation and shame. The components of the program are: learning to recognise signs and symptoms of anger; identifying feelings other than anger; reducing physical tension; evaluating and changing cognitions; and learning prosocial ways of responding to anger, particularly being assertive. Of importance is the distinction between anger (the emotion) and aggression (the behaviour). The program teaches that anger is a normal and sometimes useful emotion but that aggression is an unhelpful and unhealthy way of expressing anger.

The core components of the Getting Along & Keeping Cool program are delivered through psycho-education, self-monitoring, facilitated group discussion, handouts, videos and role plays. The program uses a central theme of a pressure cooker. The use of the visual model of the pressure cooker model is another way of helping participants remember concepts and to apply skills. Note that the video Dealing with Emotions must be purchased separately. Details are in the References section.

The session plans within this manual provide a guide to the content and to the process issues which could apply from week to week. They are, however, intended only as a guide. Young people with aggression problems tend not to respond well to a structured atmosphere which is reminiscent of school. The atmosphere should be both dynamic and informal, and the discussion guided to maximise the constructive and positive suggestions, ideas and contributions of participants. For example, if a particular group appears to be deriving particular benefit from assertiveness role plays, more time could be spent on that. Where possible, consultation with group members about what they are finding helpful and what they would like to spend extra time on gives them a greater sense of ‘ownership’ of the group. However, facilitators may also judge that extra time needs to be spent on a specific area; for example, members of a group may see aggression as part of their identity, so facilitators could increase the focus on the consequences of aggressive behaviour with the aim of enhancing motivation to change.
REFERRAL TO THE GROUP

The Keeping Cool program is intended as an adjunct to individual therapy. The group forum is an efficient and developmentally appropriate means of teaching the knowledge and skills of anger control. However, since YouthLink clients generally have multiple presenting issues, it is important that participants are linked with an individual therapist so that any other issues are being addressed as needed. To be suitable for the group, the young people should recognise that they have a problem with anger and aggression, show some commitment to making changes and be relatively stable in therapy (ie not experiencing on-going crises).

ASSESSMENT

An individual assessment session should be held with each group member both pre– and post-group. This has several functions: to assess the young person’s motivation and suitability for group work; to obtain both qualitative and quantitative measures of how the young person believes that anger is affecting his/her life; to provide information about the group; to convey therapists’ expectations about participation in the group; and to answer any questions or address any concerns of the young person about the group. The pre-group session can be used to enhance the young person’s motivation for doing the group and develop his/her initiative if there has been some degree of coercion.

Standardised measures

Two standardised self-report measures can be used to assess the effectiveness of the Keeping Cool program. The Youth Self Report (YSR; Achenbach, 1991) is a modified version of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986;1987) and assesses a range of adolescent disorders or syndromes. The eight syndrome scales are withdrawal, somatic complaints, anxious/depressed, social problems, thought problems, attention problems, delinquent behaviour and aggressive behaviour. The YSR is a useful tool for providing a relatively thorough picture of the presenting issues of the young person and to identify any other areas of potential concern. The second standardised assessment tool is the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI; Spielberger, 1988). This specifically measures four dimensions of anger: how the young person is feeling at that moment, how they generally feel, their level of control over their anger and how they express anger. It also provides composite measures of trait anger and anger expression.

Both the YSR and the STAXI have norms for adolescents.
Pre-group assessment
A semi-structured interview is used to record the young person’s perception of the extent to which anger and aggression is affecting their lives (Appendix 1). The questions are designed to be motivational by focussing the young person on the specific difficulties they are experiencing and identifying goals toward which they will work during the group. During the pre-group session the two standardised measures are administered with an explanation of why they are being used. It is explained that feedback will be given on the results of these measures after the group has finished and we have some comparison data.

Post-group assessment
Details can be found in Appendix 1. During the post-group interview consumer feedback is obtained on the content areas of the group and standardised questionnaires are re-administered. The ‘Therapeutic Factors’ questionnaire can also be given (see below). It is also an opportunity to give reinforcement for changes, and to encourage the young person to continue the work started during the group.

Other self-report measures
A ‘Therapeutic Factors’ questionnaire is used to assess the young person’s perception of the helpfulness of aspects of the group experience. It is administered on only one occasion during the post-group interview. It assesses the dimensions of: insight, altruism, guidance, catharsism, existentialism, universality, acceptance and interpersonal learning. This questionnaire was included because it is recognised that people gain therapeutically from group work other than from the content alone.

The Therapeutic Factors questionnaire has been modified from Yalom’s (1995) Q-sort measure. The modified version has now been tested on several groups of adolescents at YouthLink and been found to be easily understood and takes only a short time to administer. Further information and score guides can be obtained from YouthLink.
REFERENCES


Session 1

Introduction to the Program

Session Objectives

😊 To begin to develop trust and safety amongst group members.

😊 Establish group rules.

😊 Establish goals and commitment for change.

😊 To understand the difference between anger (feeling) and aggression (behaviour).

😊 To understand the physical and cognitive changes that occur with anger.
**Session 1 Outline**

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<td>Break</td>
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<td>Group Rules</td>
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<td>Difference Between Anger &amp; Aggression</td>
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<td>Closure</td>
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INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)
Facilitators introduce themselves and group members to one another as they arrive. When everyone has arrived, go-around again with each person giving their name. Offer drink if feasible, eg coca cola.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW (5 minutes)
Give a brief explanation of the programme which includes the following detail:
- Number of sessions
- Length of sessions
- Structure of sessions (including breaks)
- Brief overview of the programme.
An example:
“What we’ll be doing is getting to understand anger better – you’ll see that it’s a bit more complicated than just a trigger and an explosion – and most importantly you’ll learn ways to manage anger better. Today and next week we’ll start on this, but we’ll also be spending time just getting to know each other.”

ICEBREAKER (40 minutes)
Explain that the purpose of the exercise is to get to know each other a little better.
A choice of icebreaker activities are described at the end of Session 1 therapist’s notes.

BREAK (10 minutes)

GROUP RULES (10 minutes)
- Introduce the exercise by saying, for example: “although this is a course where you’ve come to learn something, some people may choose to talk about things that are personal and that they wish only the group to know. Group rules are a way of making it safe for people to talk about their experiences and to share their ideas, and a way of making sure that everyone is treated with respect. What rules would you like to

Drinks (eg Coca cola)
Note: This will be brief, as the young people will be feeling uncomfortable at this stage.

Pencils and paper or other equipment as described in the instructions.
Note: Facilitator’s should join in the activities. Therapist self-disclosure should be limited, but can help young people in their development of trust of group lead-

Butcher’s paper & Marker
Note: For young people it’s very important that they feel they ‘own’ the group. It is therefore preferable that they themselves generate the group rules. If they have difficulty prompts may be used, eg
**SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM**

Centre for Clinical Interventions

**Getting Along & Keeping Cool: Aggression Control Program**

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**DETAILED CONTENTS**

- Brainstorm rules on butcher’s paper.
- The following rules should be considered:
  - if unable to attend let the group know by calling the facilitator;
  - confidentiality;
  - respect individuality/differences (no put downs);
  - support each other;
  - no drugs or alcohol before group.

**IDENTIFY INDIVIDUAL GOALS (5 mins)**

Ask group members to remember the two goals they set before the course began. Participants may not remember. Pin up butcher’s paper with complete list and ask participants to name which goals they set.

**DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANGER & AGGRESSION (13 mins)**

- Aim of this exercise is for participants to recognise that anger is a feeling and that aggression is a behaviour.
- Ask group members to think of as many works for anger that they can think of.
- Write the works on butchers’ paper in two lists (no headings at this stage) according to whether they describe anger (feeling) or aggression (behaviour).
- If group members have difficulty generating words, hand out pieces of paper and pencils and have them do it anonymously by writing them down.
- Ask: which list is anger, and which is aggres-

**EQUIPMENT/ACTIVITY PROCESS NOTES**

- “other groups have thought it important that confidentiality be a rule. Is that something you’d like to consider?” However, the group facilitators may also need to add rules, eg “In other groups we’ve also found it’s very important that people don’t come to the group under the influence. They can’t take things in properly and it’s a waste of their time and ours. Is it okay with everyone if we add that in?”

- Pre-prepared butcher’s paper with list of all goals identified in pre-group interviews (no identifying information).

- Paper and pencils, Butchers’ paper & marker.

- Note: Group members are likely to recognise that goals set by other members are also a problem for themselves. This exercise helps motivate the group members to change, as well as building group cohesion through recognising similarities.

- Note: If group members have difficulty generating words, hand out pieces of paper and pencils and have them do it anonymously by writing them down.
**DETAILED CONTENTS**

- Elicit distinction between feeling and behaviour (action).
- Discuss which of these is giving them problems and in what ways.
- Recognise different ways of being aggressive (eg physical, verbal, hurting self, destroying property).

**CLOSURE (2 mins)**
- Motivate the group to attend the next session by
  - thanking them for their attendance
  - reiterating the essential components of the program and how useful it will be to them
  - addressing any concerns.

  For example:
  “Thanks for coming along today. This week and next we’ll be learning some basic, but central ideas about aggression and anger control, as well as spending a bit of time just getting to know each other. Over the next 8 weeks we’ll add to each session bit by bit so that by the end of the course you’ll have learned some really useful skills and have a much more complete picture of how it all works. Does anyone have any questions or concerns about the course at this stage? Are you all okay to meet here next week at the same time?”
Overview of How Anger

Session Objectives

😊 Review: the difference between anger and aggression; recognise the physical and cognitive signs of anger.

😊 Introduce the pressure cooker model.

😊 Gain awareness of their own physical signs of anger.

😊 Introduce Hassle Logs (self monitoring).
# Session 2 Outline

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<td>Recognising Signs of Anger</td>
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<td>Introduce Pressure Cooker Model</td>
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<td>Break</td>
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<td>Closure</td>
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ICEBREAKER EXERCISE (15 minutes)
- Choose short ice-breaker exercise from those suggested in Session 1; or
- each young person to focus on someone else in the group (nominated by facilitator) and say their name and two things about them that they remember from last week.

REVIEW OF LAST WEEK (5 minutes)
Ask:
- what do they remember from last week
- what do they remember about the difference between anger and aggression?

RECOGNISING SIGNS OF ANGER (10 minutes)
The aim of this exercise is to have them recognise their own signs of anger.
- Draw stick man on butcher’s paper.
- Ask: what happens when they get angry – eg red face, pace up and down, thoughts racing.
- Emphasise that when you get angry there are both physical changes as well as mental changes, and that this distinction is very important in understanding how to deal with anger.

INTRODUCE PRESSURE COOKER MODEL (15 mins)
- Draw picture of pressure cooker on butcher’s paper.
- Explain:
  “The match lights the flame which boils the pot. If you have a very hot flame, lots of stuff in the pot, lid on tight and no steam release, the lid blows off quickly. The alternative is to put out the match, lower the flame, empty the contents as much as possible, loosen the lid and open the steam release. Blowing your top when you’re angry is a bit like a pressure cooker blowing its lid. You have anger triggers (the matches) which sets off angry or aggressive thinking (the flames). If you have left over stuff from the past. Which is simmering away in the pot, this begins boiling rapidly. If you have no outlet for getting rid of physical tension (steam release) and keep your
break (10 minutes)

review the ‘signs of anger’ and relate to the pressure cooker (10 mins)
- explain the concept of ‘steam release’.
- relate this to the signs of anger, as discussed earlier.
- this could be explained as follows: “thinking back to before the break when we looked at how to recognise when you’re angry – you can think of the physical tension as the ‘steam’ that you have to release so you don’t explode. this is a really important first step in anger control. there are lots of ways of releasing steam and you probably already do some of these things”.
- group brainstorm of strategies that could be used to reduce physical tension. put ideas on the drawing of the pressure cooker next to the steam release valve.

breathing exercise (5 mins)
- teach participants a quick breathing exercise which can be used for ‘steam release’.
- this exercise may need to be sold to participants, eg “this exercise is used a lot in sports psychology, for example in martial arts it’s essential that you have control when you’re practising or fighting, and breathing is one very effective method that’s taught so you can get this control.”
- breathe in for 4 and out for 6.
- demonstrate with co-facilitator.

note: strongly reinforce the strategies that they already use.

note: participants may feel self-conscious about this. if so, get them to turn their chairs around so that they are back-to-back.
DETAILED CONTENTS

TRIGGERS AND SELF-MONITORING (10 mins)
- Introduce concept of anger triggers. Explain, for example:

  “We’ve talked about steam release as a really important way of gaining control. Another thing that’s really important is knowing what triggers off your anger. Everyone has different anger triggers – for example, for one person a trigger may be someone putting them down. Another person may not worry at all about what people think of them, but get very angry if they’re told to do something. Looking at the pressure cooker you can see that the trigger is like the match or spark that sets the whole thing off. You can get more control over your anger by knowing what your triggers are so that you can prepare for them in advance.”

- Introduce hassle logs. Explain, for example:
  The way to get to know your triggers is by filling out a ‘Hassle Log’. (Hand out Hassle Logs.) You don’t need to fill out the whole book – just record about two times when you get angry. And you don’t have to record times when you explode. You can record times when you get angry but manage to deal with it effectively.”

- Open Hassle Logs and explain how to record.
- Ask participants to bring hassle logs next week.
- Check that participants understand the task.

CLOSURE (10 minutes)
- Brief review.
- Motivate participants to return, for example:
  We’ve now covered the basic things you need to know about anger and aggression (the difference between anger and aggression and how to recognise when you’re angry) and showed you the pressure cooker model. Over the remaining few weeks you’ll get to grips with how it all works and the different strategies you can use to gain control over your anger. Try to remember to bring your Hassle Logs. Any thoughts or questions?

Hassle Logs (See Appendix 3 for the master copy; this is best made into booklet form with the cover provided.)

Enlarged page from Hassle Log for demonstrating (on next page).
HASSLE LOG

Date____________ Morning _____ Afternoon_____ Evening _____

Where were you? ____________________________________________

What happened?
- Somebody put me down
- Somebody yelled at me
- Somebody told me to do something
- Somebody was doing something I didn’t like
- Somebody started fighting with me
- I did something wrong
- Other ________________________________________________

Who was that somebody? ___________________________________

What were your feelings? angry _____ frustrated ____ scared ____
- shamed-out ____ put down _____ sad _____ other___

What did you do?
- hit someone____
- breathe deeply _____
- visualise ______
- cried ______
- count backwards _____
- ignored ______
- yelled ______
- walked away calmly____
- talked to friend____
- was restrained____
- took time out ______
- was assertive____
- ran away____
- used chill-out phrase ____
- changed thinking__
- broke something__
- talked to someone____
- other __________

What happened next?
____________________________________________________________________

How full-on were your feelings?

1              2                   3                       4                       5
not at all      slightly       quite a bit       very full-on        extremely

How did you handle yourself?

1                        2                    3               4                      5
poorly           not so well          okay           good              great
Session 3

Triggers and Steam Release

Session Objectives

😊 Review session 2: anger vs aggression; physical signs of anger; pressure cooker.

😊 Recognise anger triggers (relate to the concept of ‘the match or spark’).

😊 Recognise existing skills in reducing tension (‘letting off steam’). Learn new ways of letting off steam.
# Session 3 Outline

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<td>Steam Release</td>
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<td>Triggers</td>
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<td>Break</td>
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<td>Triggers (cont.)</td>
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<td>Closure</td>
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DETAILED CONTENTS

REVIEW (10 minutes)
- Ask participants to remember what was covered in the previous two weeks.
- Prompt if necessary:
  - Anger vs aggression
  - Signs of anger – physical and mental
  - Pressure cooker model
  - Steam release
  - Triggers & Hassle Logs.

STEAM RELEASE (40 mins)
- Go-around group and ask them to share a Hassle Log entry with the other participants.
- If they have left them at home or forgotten to about them, ask them to remember an incident from the previous week when they got angry, and tell the rest of the group using the Hassle Log format.
- Reinforce any control strategies used.
- Turn focus to steam release strategies.
- Emphasise the importance of being able to cool yourself down physically before you respond to a trigger. For example: “Cooling down by releasing steam allows you to then choose your response. This gives you heaps more control. Last week we made a list of things that you already do to let off steam and we also did a breathing exercise used by athletes and experts in the martial arts. I’ve also got a list here of other things that people find helpful to cool down. I’ll give this list to you before you go.”
- Explain the importance of practice.

TRIGGERS (10 mins)
- Using examples from hassle logs, think of their triggers.
- Brainstorm, and add to the pressure cooker illustration completed last week. A participant can act as scribe. Relate to pressure cooker model. For example: “These are like the matches, the things that spark you off. Over the next few weeks you might think of other things to add to it.”
BREAK (10 mins)

TRIGGERS (cont.) (15 mins)
- Use video to facilitate discussion.
- Explore:
  - What were the triggers?
  - How did they respond?
  - What was the consequence?

CLOSURE (5 mins)
- Ask group to continue completing Hassle Logs.
- Hand out ‘Steam Release’ worksheet & ‘Deep Breathing’ sheet. Remind participants that they tried the deep breathing exercise last week and that this sheet will help them remember what to do.
- Again emphasise the need for practice. (Add: “Steam release techniques can be used in many situations, not just when you’re full-on angry.”)

Equipment/Activity

- Hassle Logs (spare booklets to use if needed)
- Steam Release worksheet (Appendix 2).
- Deep Breathing sheet (Appendix 2).