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Could I send Mr Angry packing?

Like so many today, Philip Robinson struggles to control his fury - horrified at repeatedly raging at his children, he tried a very unconventional therapy...so how did he get on?

By [Philip Robinson](#)

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My eight-year-old son Oscar glares at me across the kitchen table. Tears fill his eyes.

'I hate you,' he exclaims. 'Why are you so horrible to me?'

'Do your damned homework and everything will be fine!' I shout.

He starts to cry. 'Why are you so mean?' he sobs, and runs out of the room, slamming the door, which makes me grind my teeth.



Anger management: Philip Robinson (left) struggles to control his fury. Horrified at repeatedly raging at his children, he tried a very unconventional therapy run by anger expert Mike Fisher, right

It's 8.30pm and he still hasn't done his homework. He is as stubborn as I am — and now almost as angry.

I know I'm making the situation worse. In my head, I justify it, the same way thousands of other parents around Britain justify it: if I don't make him work, he'll fall behind, fail at school and spend his life working in McDonald's.

The worst thing is that I tell my beloved eldest child all of this and what I think of him. In fact, every time I open my mouth I seem to aggravate things. The house often sits under a black cloud of disapproval as my anger taints the atmosphere.

My wife and Oscar get the worst of it, but even my youngest two boys tip-toe around me.

In my frequent rages, I have smashed computer printers, kicked holes in doors, dented walls and thrown just about every battery-powered toy into the garden. Eventually, I'll throw myself out there.

I have no idea how to silence the fury in my head. I only know I'm on a dangerous downward spiral. It's not only me; recent statistics show the whole nation is getting angrier. The average Briton flies into a rage four times a day, and one in ten of us claims to have been in an accident caused by road rage.

There is anger everywhere, from millionaire footballers screaming obscenities into TV cameras to ordinary people spitting bile at bankers, inflation and greedy MPs.

Our courts and prisons are filled with angry people or victims of anger: people who didn't have the ability to solve their conflicts without verbal aggression or violence.

Recently, one Cardiff woman even smashed up her local bakery, causing hundreds of pounds worth of damage. The provocation? They'd sold out of her favourite cupcakes.

On top of this, anger is costing us a fortune: the Mental Health Foundation estimates the bill to the NHS of our torment and agony as £105 billion a year.

This can't be good for us. For as rage spreads, so it becomes more acceptable to display it. I notice that I no longer avoid confrontations: I will happily argue with a loudmouth in the cinema or a reckless motorist.

Family life just isn't fun any more. Even trips to the park are spoiled because the four-year-old has jumped in a large puddle and is covered in mud from head to foot, or the six-year-old has disappeared into the woods for two minutes.

Instead of reassuring my boys and ruffling their hair, I yell and scream and drag them home.

I know in my gut that the punishment hardly fits the crime and that it has to stop. I don't want my sons turning out like me. My wife sends me an email with a link to a weekend intensive anger management course run by Mike Fisher, one of the country's leading anger experts. Apparently, just by attending the course, I'll feel lighter and happier.



Giving back: Mike set up the British Association of Anger Management in 1997 after a business betrayal sent him into a frenzy of rage

I sign up with a sense of suspicion. If anyone thinks I'm going to run around naked in the woods in search of my inner karma, I'm coming straight home.

Things get off to a bad start. Driving down to Sussex for my first day of anger therapy, I find myself in a road rage incident with a white van that drives dangerously close behind me along a leafy country lane.

I despise such behaviour and, in a bid to teach the numbskull a lesson, I slow my car to 10mph and watch him flip out behind me.

Good. I want this van driver to taste my justice. I want a squash ball-sized blood vessel to pop in his head. I really need help.

I arrive five minutes late, bathed in a fury-induced sweat. I walk into the therapy room and find five equally blotchy, scowling men looking back at me. I take my seat knowing I'm in the right place.

Mike congratulates us for being there and explains the course is usually 60/40 men to women. He warns us that he doesn't want us sitting around telling anger war stories.

He reminds me of a captain taking control of a mutinous lifeboat. He swears enough to not sound too wishy-washy and Californian.

He set up the British Association of Anger Management in 1997 after a business betrayal sent him into a frenzy of rage. His temper is under control, but he doesn't suffer any nonsense. He has the group's instant, begrudging respect.

Each person explains who they are and why they are on the course. We have a 50-year-old Scotsman who argues with his daughter; a 38-year-old journalist (me) who screams at his son; a 43-year-old economist and product of a top boarding school whose temper is taking its toll on his marriage; a builder who flew into a rage because his wife bought a dress; a cantankerous Star Trek fan who hates the world; a jargon-spouting maths professor who claims (unconvincingly) he has nothing to be angry about; and a retired businessman who can't talk to his family without getting drunk and hostile.

We discuss what we think makes us angry. We hear every excuse from 'the economy' to 'the situation in Libya'. One chap blames his wife and wins nods and approval.

Then Rory the Scotsman turns bright red and explodes: 'I'll tell you the truth, lads. I don't care if you get better or not. I don't give a damn. I only care about me, and you can't help me. I don't care about any of you!'

We all burst out laughing. It's what everyone is thinking. His honesty has melted the atmosphere.

Mike explains that we become angry when our needs are not met. Basic requirements include love, respect, the need to be heard - stuff without which it's almost impossible to succeed as a human being.

We all have a right to expect at least some of these things from those around us, as they have a right to expect them from us.

When these big hitters go missing (or we don't feel able or worthwhile enough to demand them), we get sad, frustrated and angry.

Mike scribbles a long list on a white board — it has a palpable effect on the room. These are profound essentials that none of these tough guys has ever allowed themselves to consider. These are things ladies think about, not men.

We head off into small groups to, as Mike says, 'shake the apple tree': identify incidents where we felt angry and pinpoint our unmet needs. No, I can't quite believe it either. My cynical side is straining at the leash.

We sit outdoors and I help the maths professor 'shake his apple tree'. He insists that the sole source of anger in his life is Microsoft because its computer programs are always crashing. I want to strangle the apple tree. We start to argue.

Mike wanders over and lies down on the grass behind us. 'Don't let him off the hook,' he urges.

So I confront the professor. 'You're talking rubbish,' I tell him. 'There isn't a computer in the world that can make you feel that angry!'



Zen: Phil's anger therapy changed his life and he feels more in control of his temper

I tell him he's wasting his time on the course and we go back inside, barely able to look at one another. Oh dear.

We end the first day talking about 'the shadow': the memories, emotions and experiences deep inside us that, according to psychiatrist Carl Jung, control us unconsciously.

The shadow is every issue in our past and present that we can't face: the events that shame us and make us feel worthless.

The following day we will take the shadow and expose it to the light. I don't expect anyone to show up.

I go home exhausted, in time to kiss the family good-night. I don't feel hostile; I feel incredibly quiet.

The next morning I am surprised to see that none of the group has dropped out.

We seem more unified and calmer. The maths professor even apologises for being cold and shut off from the group. He says he thought about his behaviour all night and kept recalling an episode from his childhood when he was in hospital alone and terrified.

Mike explains we can all connect with him now that he is being truthful, open and vulnerable. He tells us it's good to be like this, and if people want to reject that, you might ask yourself why you are hanging around them in the first place.

I find myself agreeing. I feel dangerously close to quitting journalism and opening a pottery shop.

The next step is the Detour Method. This is about looking at the big problem we walked in with and locating the event or issue behind it that's causing all the emotional distress and anger.

Rory and I have a similar problem: we feel antagonistic towards our children when they disappoint us.

I begin by identifying that I lose my mind and fly into a rage when Oscar doesn't do his schoolwork.

I babble out the words, secretly believing this process is too clumsy and contrived to work. Yet even as I'm thinking this, the memory of screaming at my son unlocks a ball of anger, shame and embarrassment from my own childhood. I turn bright red and begin to stumble over my prepared script.

Rory asks me how old I feel. Out of nowhere I say: 'Ten.' He asks what happened when I was ten, and I tell him that I'm at the dining room table with my Dad. It's Sunday afternoon and we're doing maths.

I am right there. I see the curtains pulled together, a chink of sunlight on the table. I want to be outside.

'I'm not ashamed to admit that tears start to flood out of me'

Rory asks what happened. I tell him my Dad is in a rage with me because I can't get the concept of vulgar fractions into my thick head.

I want to leave, but he won't let me — not until I've got the question right. I stay, but I am too upset to learn anything, too stupid. I feel like a prisoner.

Rory asks me what I would say if I could turn back the clock. I reply: 'I'd ask him why he wasn't nicer to me.'

'Louder,' says Rory.

I say it again, and I'm not ashamed to admit that tears start to flood out of me — and Rory is crying, too.

I remember how scared I felt back then and how I could never speak up for myself.

I realise how brave my son is: he dares to challenge me even though I'm 3ft taller than he is and much angrier than I remember my own father being.

I have an overwhelming sense of revelation — and there is no animosity towards Dad. As a father myself, I understand why he did what he did; that he loved me and desperately wanted me to have every chance in life.

I feel a rush of love for him, and my son, all at the same time.

Like that scene in one of the Indiana Jones films where they emerge from a tunnel to see a lost kingdom with parrots flapping over a jungle, it strikes me that this is a very strange thing to have stumbled upon.

I realise that I can be a better parent. I can be kinder to my family. I can be kinder to myself.

'Bloody hell!' says Rory, wiping away his own tears. 'I bet you didn't expect that.'

The drive home is peaceful. Life has already slowed. The inside of my head sounds like a rather gentle cocktail party. The toxic blabbermouth has been bounced out the door and the evening has settled into a sedate, convivial groove.

At home, I talk to my little Oscar. He tells me how I wasn't nice to him. As he talks, he starts to cry.

And then I cry, and I'm able to tell him that Grandad used to argue with me in the same way when I was little. I tell him I'm sorry I got angry, but that I love him a lot.

He understands it's over and we have a big hug. I plan to go and see my old man and give him a hug, too.

It's two weeks since the anger therapy finished and I can't quite believe how much it has changed my life. I feel in control. I don't get angry like I used to.

When I feel the rage boiling up inside me, instead of screaming and shouting, I try to use it as an opportunity to look into my past and find out what I'm really upset about.

Even the children are getting used to talking out their anger and frustration, as I now do. Our house feels warmer, calmer and more positive. If all this continues, I might be happy for my children to turn out like me after all.

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I think a little clue as to the mindset of - Donk, Macclesfield, 27/4/2011 07:04, is that he has named himself after the monosyllabic character in Crocodile Dundee.

- maria, London, 27/4/2011 10:25

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I'm THE cantankerous Star Trek fan who hates the world. I think this article is great and hope it conveys the impact of the