



Blending Voice Therapy with Expressive Art Therapy To Treat Adolescent Anger

by Lou Orsan

When working with adolescents and teens, I meet young clients who are cut off from their feelings as a result of early childhood conditioning. Many were told at an early age "it isn't okay" to express certain feelings – especially anger – and they learned to suppress this emotion to avoid negative reactions from adults in their lives. Suppressing anger often leads to impulsive acting out or withdrawal behaviors fueled by criticism and blaming thoughts toward themselves or directed outward toward others.

In my anger management practice, I have found that blending the Voice Therapy techniques I recently learned in the March 2005 Level I Training with expressive art therapy enhances therapeutic effectiveness for this age group. By giving both a verbal and visual expression to their feelings, young clients seem more willing to access them.

Typically, a session begins with helping the young person to identify the issue or situation resulting in their emotional upset. I then ask her or him to close their eyes while I ask: *"What do you think you're telling yourself when this is happening?"* As the young person verbalizes their inner- or outward critical voices, I encourage him or her to bring their attention down into their body and say: *"really feel the feelings that are coming up."* Once these feelings are accessed, I place an 18" x 24" sheet of drawing paper and jumbo crayons in front of them. I then state: *"Now open your eyes, and without thinking about what to draw, use colors, lines and shapes, or even scribbles, to spontaneously draw a picture of what you're feeling. Imagine the feelings as energy being released from your body and into the paper through your movements."* If intense anger or rage is evoked after the drawing is finished I often ask: *"Would you be willing to tear up your drawing into little pieces to release any left over anger or resentment feelings you might be carrying?"*

Once emotional releasing is complete, the young person will often have a feeling of relief, and be more relaxed or happier. However, in some instances, painful feelings that were hidden underneath the anger, such as sadness or abandonment, will need to be processed as well.

I end the session by encouraging the client to share any insights that came through as a result of processing their inner voices and feelings. Often these insights can serve to empower the young person in realizing that they have a choice in what they think and feel, and also help us map a plan of action for behavioral change.

Lou Orsan, MFA is an anger management counselor, expressive art therapist, and emotional trauma release practitioner in private practice in Kirkland, Washington.

The opinions expressed in this story are those of the author.