

ABSTRACT

This study was about childhood experiences of anger and how they impact on the individual both as a child and as an adult. The aim was to investigate effects on adults' perception and expression of anger, and look for possible links with their emotional, and possibly physical, health.

Four trainee psychotherapists, all British and caucasian were interviewed, comprising three females and one male. The research was carried out using a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The interviews lasted approximately for one hour, with no fixed questions, just one opening question, inviting the participants to describe their experience of anger in their childhood and how it affected them as adults. The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed by the interviewer. Themes that emerged were clustered and organised into categories.

Anger clearly had a large impact on the participants when they were children, and the effects lasted into their adult lives. A common experience was that anger was a taboo emotion for children, so that they were not allowed to express anger, although they wanted to. Depression and shame-based responses appeared to be linked to anger not being expressed in childhood; it is already known that proneness to shame is associated with maladaptive and destructive responses to anger (Tangey *et al.*, 1996). The adults studied all carried parental anger from their childhood, and reacted to anger in the same way their parents had reacted to them as children, suggested that responses to anger are conditioned by family environment.

The female participants reported that anger that was not expressed for fear of causing a rift in a close relationship, especially when anger was suppressed when they were children, could nevertheless have a corrosive effect on the relationship. Anger caused the female participants to become regressed when they felt unsafe around the emotion, and two of the women in the study found difficulty, with men who got angry. Though the study was small, it did support the widely held belief that anger expression is less acceptable in females, leading to possible emotional and relationship difficulties.