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A one-day workshop with Susanna Abse on working with anger and aggression

How do you define conflict?
When does it move from passion to something more hostile?
What do we mean by aggression?
What is your relationship to your own aggression?
How do you manage your anger and aggression?
Are there certain arenas where anger comes out, perhaps in sport, sex, card games?
What did you make of your parents relationship, what did you witness and see?
Do you think it is possible to have a good relationship with no anger or aggression?
How do you define a healthy relationship?

Perhaps it is one that can transform, grow, care and develop, in relation to the changing needs of each individual, rather than being stuck. Aggression can be useful if it means that difficulties are addressed in a creative and open way, rather than a passive, nagging, undermining form. We need aggression for separation and individuation, which is often a problem in couples; how can one accept and relate to each other as separate individuals.

Anger can often be seen as hope. In insecure attachment anger is aimed at getting an attachment figure to notice, in the hope that anger will result in repair and understanding. But there can also be anger of despair, in insecure avoidant, which there is high hostility, but the anger is minimised, denied or unconsciously felt. In preoccupied attachment, there is rumination and a flooding with feelings, and anger can be very hard to manage. With disorganised attachment anger is linked to violence and abuse.

Often anger and aggression arises in apparently harmonious couples, due to something that destabilises the system, such as a child, or an affair. What is the fear around anger, what is being defended against? Possibly fear of conflict, intimacy, abandonment, or sublimation. It is important to have confidence in the ability for rupture and repair, so that anger does not have to be avoided. In relation to this it is worth considering how disagreements and separations were reacted to as a child. Could you believe that parents could survive your necessary attacks – could it be worked through, or was it punished? The beliefs and fantasy underneath the arguments and aggression are important to explore. It is important to remember that just because people don't shout, it doesn't mean that they are not aggressive. Walking away, being put down, sarcasm, blame, emotional manipulation, body language are all acts of aggression to be decoded.

It is very important to get clients to understand misunderstandings – we all continuously make wrong assumptions, and a willingness to constantly check and update

Working with anger and aggression

Version 1.0

these is vital – we need to stay with uncertainty and curiosity. Therapists must maintain ‘the columbo stance’, ‘Socratic mode’ of not-knowing and taking an inquiring stance.

Get into a mentalising state to deal with anger is useful. Mentalising state is going on when: selectiveness (not rambling), lively consciousness, freshness of speech, capacity for humour, little self deception, ease and openness with the ability to alter one’s views, ease with imperfections of self and others and with empathy.