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Resolution of lingering anger following interpersonal grievances: Examining mechanisms of change in rumination, reappraisal, and identification of unmet needs

Many clients present to psychotherapy feeling stuck with lingering feelings of anger, bitterness, or resentment in response to interpersonal grievances. Anger rumination is defined as “the tendency to focus attention on angry moods, recall past anger episodes, and think over the causes and consequences of anger episodes” (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001, p. 692), often keeping people stuck in lingering anger by keeping angry thoughts and feelings alive. As such, cognitive reappraisal and needs identification interventions have been used to help clients make sense of and work through their lingering anger. Cognitive reappraisal involves “changing how we think about a situation in order to decrease its emotional impact” (Gross, 2001, p. 214), for example, by taking a neutral, third-person perspective or engaging in benefit-finding or positive perspective-taking. In contrast, needs identification involves accessing core, unmet psychological needs (e.g., for relatedness, competence, or autonomy) underlying feelings of anger in order to transform maladaptive, rejecting anger into more adaptive, assertive anger (Pascual-Leone, 2018).

The current project sought to answer the following questions: Are cognitive reappraisal and needs identification interventions effective for working through lingering anger? And, if so, how do they work? Using an experimental, therapy-analogue design, 197 undergraduate participants (Study 1) completed a brief, self-guided online intervention involving either anger rumination (control), cognitive reappraisal, or needs identification. This design was replicated in a clinical sample of 31 participants (Study 2) who were recruited from local mental health clinics using the same interventions completed in-person with a clinician.

Cognitive reappraisal was found to facilitate improvements in self-reported anger arousal, resolution, and forgiveness of interpersonal grievances in both subclinical and clinical samples. Needs identification was associated with improvements in forgiveness in the subclinical sample, but not in the clinical sample. In contrast, anger rumination produced little change in outcomes in a subclinical sample but appeared to worsen anger-related difficulties in a clinical sample. The current project replicates and extends previous research by suggesting that cognitive reappraisal is more than just an emotion-regulation strategy – it is also an effective meaning-making strategy that helps people work through lingering feelings of anger toward resolution or forgiveness of interpersonal grievances.