

Handling anger

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Parents often ask me how they can handle their own anger that arises when their children are behaving thoughtlessly. To answer this question and to understand our anger, we need first to understand both emotions and thinking.

EMOTIONS

Emotions arise in us when we have unmet needs. This can be written mathematically:

Unmet needs → EMOTION

The purpose of emotions is hinted by the very word *emotion*. Their intent is to mobilise us to take action to meet our needs (Rosenberg 2005: 11). Our feelings are there to help us to understand what needs are not being met and motivate us to do something about that.

Although we would prefer to have our needs met all the time and therefore consider our feelings about unmet needs to be 'negative', the term is unfortunate, because these so-called 'negative' emotions are actually our allies, signalling to us that we are not satisfied and therefore driving us to find a solution. Therefore, when we are distressed, we need to listen to what we are feeling, because our churning emotions are like the dashboard light that signals that our car's engine is overheating. We may wish that the light would go out, but the only way to achieve that is to fix the cause of the overheating.

THOUGHTS

Feelings are experienced in the body; whereas thoughts centre in our heads. They are ideas about facts, information and knowledge. Feelings have a physical component (such as a chemical release in the brain, changes to our heart rate, blood pressure and so on), but we could not interpret and understand the meaning of these physiological changes without *thinking* about events outside of us that might be stimulating these signals.

Thus, few emotions are pure; most are a product of our thinking. The few pure emotions which babies are born able to feel are love, joy, sadness, and pain. Once infants start to understand their world and therefore can anticipate outcomes, they acquire the more complex emotions including surprise, amazement, anticipation, grief, apprehension, embarrassment, fear and anger. These are blends of feelings and thoughts.

Demanding thinking

When we add thinking to an original emotion, we choose which feeling we experience by selecting the thoughts we entertain. When we think realistically, we generate realistic emotions.

However, when we add demanding thinking to an original emotion, we generate extreme emotions. These are emotions that have escalated (become 'over the top') because we have used words such as *should*, *must*, or *can't*, as in, 'I shouldn't have to put up with this'...'They should behave better'...and so on. (See Table 1 for a list of common demanding thoughts.)

Table 1 Demanding versus realistic thinking

Demanding thinking	Realistic thinking
1 I must be loved, or at least liked, and approved of by every significant person I meet. I am bad and unlovable if I get rejected.	I want to be loved, liked or approved of by the people who are important to me and I may feel sad and lonely if I am not. I can cope with these feelings, however, and can take constructive steps to build and keep better relationships, without submerging my own rights.
2 To be worthwhile, I must be completely competent and achieve in every possible way.	I would like to do well as a parent, worker, partner, son/daughter, friend. But, like everyone else, I will occasionally make mistakes. I know that I will feel disappointed when I do, but I can cope with these feelings and learn from the experience so that I grow over time.
3 I should have the solution to every problem.	I do not know everything. I can open myself up to learn things that I need to know and can apply this knowledge conscientiously and with the courage to be imperfect.
4 Other people in my life must always be happy, or it is my fault.	Other people are responsible for their own feelings. I can guide them but I am not responsible if they choose to live unhappy lives.
5 I should look after others, never myself.	Other people will feel disappointed if they want me to do something for them and I do not. I may be rejected or disapproved of, but I can cope with those feelings and can accept myself and my decision.
6 It is a catastrophe when things aren't how I want them to be. People <i>must</i> treat me fairly and give me what I want.	It is disappointing, sometimes very disappointing, when things aren't how I would like them to be, but I can cope with that. I can take steps to change situations, and manage my own thinking so that I do not exaggerate my disappointment.
7 If there is every anything to be done, I must not relax until it is completed.	I am allowed to rest when I wish.
8 I should worry a good deal about anything that could go wrong for me or other people in my life.	Worrying about things that could go wrong will not stop them from happening. I can prepare for possible problems without dwelling on them; can live without guarantees; and can focus on the good that is present in my life now.
9 I need someone stronger than myself to rely on. I cannot survive alone.	I like to have support from other people when I want it, although I can survive on my own. The only person that I need to rely on is myself.
10 I have problems now because of what has happened to me in the past. The past is outside my control, so I cannot do anything about my problems now.	I cannot change events in the past but I can control how I think about them now so that I grow in ways that will be effective and rewarding for me.

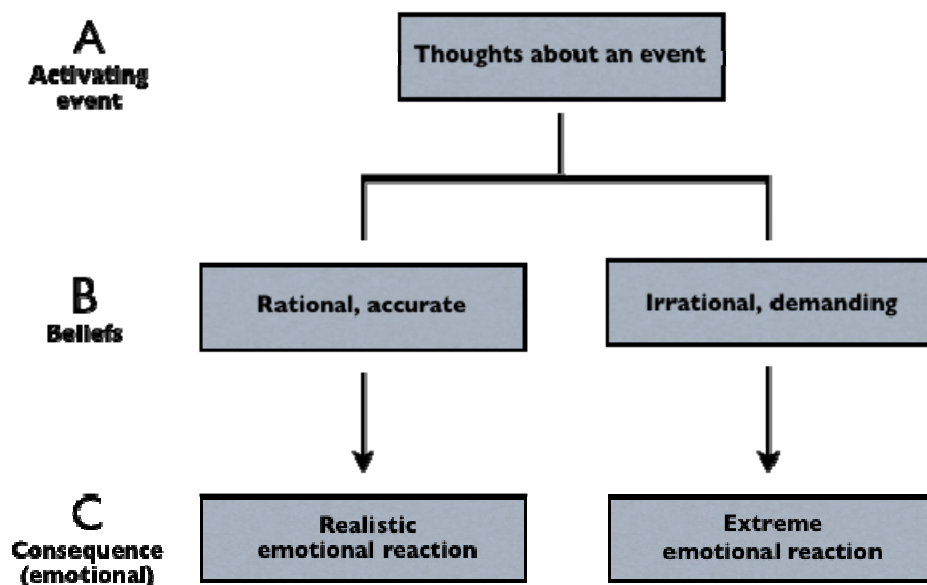
Source: Ellis & Harper in Bernard (1987, pp. 29-31, 39-41)

When we also believe that other people ‘make’ us feel badly, we tend to:

- demand that they stop it, and
- exaggerate the consequences if they should continue what they are doing.

The result of these errors in thinking is that, rather than feeling healthy emotions such as sadness, regret, sorrow, annoyance or frustration, we generate feelings that are excessive, illogical, self-defeating and upsetting (Ellis 2005; Gonzalez et al. 2004), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The alternate pathways to emotion



Another way of expressing this is with the formula, which now becomes:

$$\text{Unmet needs} + \text{Demanding thinking} \longrightarrow \text{EXTREME EMOTION}$$

When we add demands to our initial feelings, we generate extreme emotions, such as:

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| aghast | appalled | bitter |
| contemptuous | disappointed | depressed |
| disgusted | envious | horrified |
| indignant | jealous | offended |
| outraged | resentful | revolted |
| scornful | shocked | sickened |
| spiteful | | |

Beneath these experiences is an original feeling, such as hurt or fear, but this emotion becomes exaggerated by our demanding thinking. When we indulge in demanding thinking, it is harder for us to focus on what we need. In comparison, thoughts that express our desires are more achievable or realistic, and less likely to engender exaggerated emotions.

Sometimes, our children’s behaviour activates these over-reactions in us, with the result that we find it difficult to listen to the need that underlies their actions; instead we focus on our own emotions and needs, blaming our children for how we feel.

Fake emotions

A second occasion when we confuse thoughts and feelings could be termed fake emotions or *thoughts in disguise*. These are 'I-feel' statements so they *appear* to be feelings, but they are followed by words such as *that, as if, or like*:

- I feel that I'm being asked to do too much*
- I feel as if I'm the only one willing to go the extra mile*
- I feel like I'm under pressure*

We can tell that these are thoughts, because they would make as much sense if they were stated thus:

- I believe that I'm being asked to do too much*
- I consider that I'm the only one willing to go the extra mile*
- I am under pressure*

Identifying thoughts behind fake feeling statements

Thoughts disguised as feelings

- I feel that you should tidy your room
- I feel like a failure
- I feel that I have to do everything around here
- I feel that she is being bossy

Actual feeling

- I am frustrated at this mess
- I am disappointed in myself
- I resent being overworked
- I am angry at being denied the chance to make my own decisions

Victim statements

A third occasion when we confuse thoughts and feelings is when we employ *victim statements*. These arise when we focus on how others 'should' be treating us. This type of statement reflects a judgment (that is, a thought) about others or their behaviour:

- I feel left out by the group*
- I feel that she is manipulating me*
- I feel that it isn't fair how much work I have to do*

These statements place us in the role of victim. They indicate that we believe other people are to blame for how we feel: how we feel is someone else's fault. This type of message generally implies that we believe other people *should* or *should not* be acting in particular ways. Victim words include the following:

abandoned	abused	attacked
betrayed	bullied	cheated
coerced	condemned	cornered
deserted	distrusted	dominated
ignored	imposed upon	intimidated
invisible	isolated	left out
let down	manipulated	misunderstood
neglected	overworked	patronised
persecuted	pressured	provoked
put down	rejected	rushed
taken for granted	threatened	trapped
unappreciated	unfair	unheard
unseen	unwanted	used

Activity: Distinguishing feelings from thoughts

Tick which of the following statements are feelings, and leave blank those that are thoughts. (The answers are at the end of this paper.)

- 1 I feel that you are not listening to me
- 2 I am sad
- 3 I'm depressed
- 4 I feel uncertain what to do
- 5 I'm excited at the prospect of my new job
- 6 I feel that I do most of the work around here
- 7 I feel miserable
- 8 I feel so isolated
- 9 I am disgusted at you
- 10 I feel as if I'm the only one around here putting in any effort
- 11 I am dreading the new job
- 12 I was shocked at his behaviour
- 13 I feel betrayed by him
- 14 I feel guilty for letting her down
- 15 I admire how much effort you've put in
- 16 I am so angry about that

Source: This activity was adapted from Rosenberg (2003: 47).

ANGER

When we have become angry, we have added judgments (of ourselves or others) to our demanding thinking. We might also be employing fake feeling statements or victim statements, which add further fire to our emotional reactions.

The formula *now* becomes:



In other words, when we are feeling angry towards our children, the following sequence has happened:

- We are experiencing a prior emotion because we want something that we are not receiving. Anger is the second emotion that we feel: it follows hurt or fear (of getting hurt), while frustration is based on fear that we will not have our needs met.
- We demand that others *should* supply what we need. ('They *should* do as they're told'.)
- Next, we judge ourselves or others for what we feel. ('I'm an idiot for not knowing how to handle this'.)

Anger is the tip of the iceberg. It is visible because it is explosive but, because it is explosive, we tend to lose sight of the feeling that lies beneath it.

Another way of thinking about anger is that it is like a phone ringing: it's our own feelings 'ringing our bell'. We have to pick up our receiver to discover what need of ours is at the other end.

A third way to think about anger is that it is our alarm clock: it's there to wake us up to what we are feeling (Rosenberg 2003: 144). When we focus on our anger instead of paying attention to the underlying need, we use up energy that is needed to meet our needs.

The anger iceberg:



In other words, anger is the outcome of a sequence where we add to the heat of an original (and legitimate) feeling about an unmet need, by indulging in demanding thinking (sometimes adding in fake feelings or victim statements as well), then adding judgmental thought. When we do this, we are likely to speak or behave in a way that will virtually guarantee that we will not get what we want – or that, if we do, it will not be given willingly. We are likely to express our anger in the form of a ‘you-message’ which implies that ‘you’ make me angry.

We have four choices about how to respond to our anger (Rosenberg 2005: 20):

- go into our heads and judge the other person
- go into our heads and judge ourselves
- connect empathically with our own needs
- connect empathically with the other person’s needs

Given the undesired outcomes of blaming others or ourselves, we must instead focus on the need. To do this, the basic steps for dealing with anger are:

1. **Stop.** Breathe. Take your time.
2. **Identify the judgmental thoughts** that are causing your anger. Listen out specifically for the words *should, shouldn’t, ought, must or must not*.
3. **Identify your unmet need** that gives rise to the anger.
4. **Reconnect with your intention or purpose:** decide what you want to achieve right now for yourself and for your relationships.
5. **Express your feelings and unfulfilled need.**
6. **Request** what the other person can do to meet our needs, using language that avoids judgments and criticism.

Activity: Transforming anger

- Think of a situation in which you felt angry.
- What thoughts or judgments led to your anger? (I thought or judged that...)
- What need of yours was not being met when you felt angry?
- What feeling occurred before the anger (often sadness, fear, or hurt)?
- What action would have resolved your anger? What could you have said or done that would make it more likely that your need was met, without damaging the relationship?

You might find it useful to complete this activity by writing your answers in the boxes on page 8, in their numbered order.

Steps for handling anger

The aim of transforming anger into its underlying emotion is not to suppress, deny or stifle your anger but to channel its energy towards fulfilling your needs. This transformation does not take superhuman effort: suppressing the feeling is what takes extraordinary effort. But it *will* take practice.

Identify your reaction

- Step 1 *Take your time.* Focus on your goal, which is to identify and express your underlying needs in ways that ensure that everyone involved has their needs met also.
- Step 2 *Describe what happened.* Identify the stimulus, without forming judgments. Take a clear look at what events you are reacting to.
- Step 3 *Identify your judgmental thinking.* Anger signals that you are judging and blaming others for acting as they did. Listen to these thoughts. You may feel vindicated by them, so enjoy the show if you want. But know that they distract you from focusing on your precious needs so, after recognising the thought game going on in your head, divorce the other person from any responsibility for your anger.

Relate compassionately to yourself

Your anger is righteous in the dual senses that it is right to feel distressed about an unfulfilled need, and you have a right to have your needs met. Honour this by addressing the real emotion and unmet need.

- Step 4 *Focus on your needs,* recognising that your anger is a signal that your needs are not being met. Focus your entire consciousness on that underlying feeling and the need it indicates.
- Step 5 *Determine your needs.* Transform your judgmental thinking into a statement of the form: 'I feel...because I need...' (rather than 'I feel angry because you...'). When you discover the underlying need, your anger will melt away. This does not mean that you have denied, stifled or repressed your feelings: you have transformed your anger into more authentic feelings. These remaining emotions may still be intense and even painful, but they won't include anger.
- Step 6 *Focus on positive actions.* Plan what steps would help to meet your needs. This must be a positive action that others could *do* to meet your needs, rather than requesting that they stop a behaviour.
- Step 7 *Formulate a clear action request.* Plan what you could ask the other person to do in the moment that will meet your needs, even if this is only agreeing to do something at a future date. A request could begin with, 'Would you be willing to...?' or 'Would you agree to...?' Do not make this request yet, however.

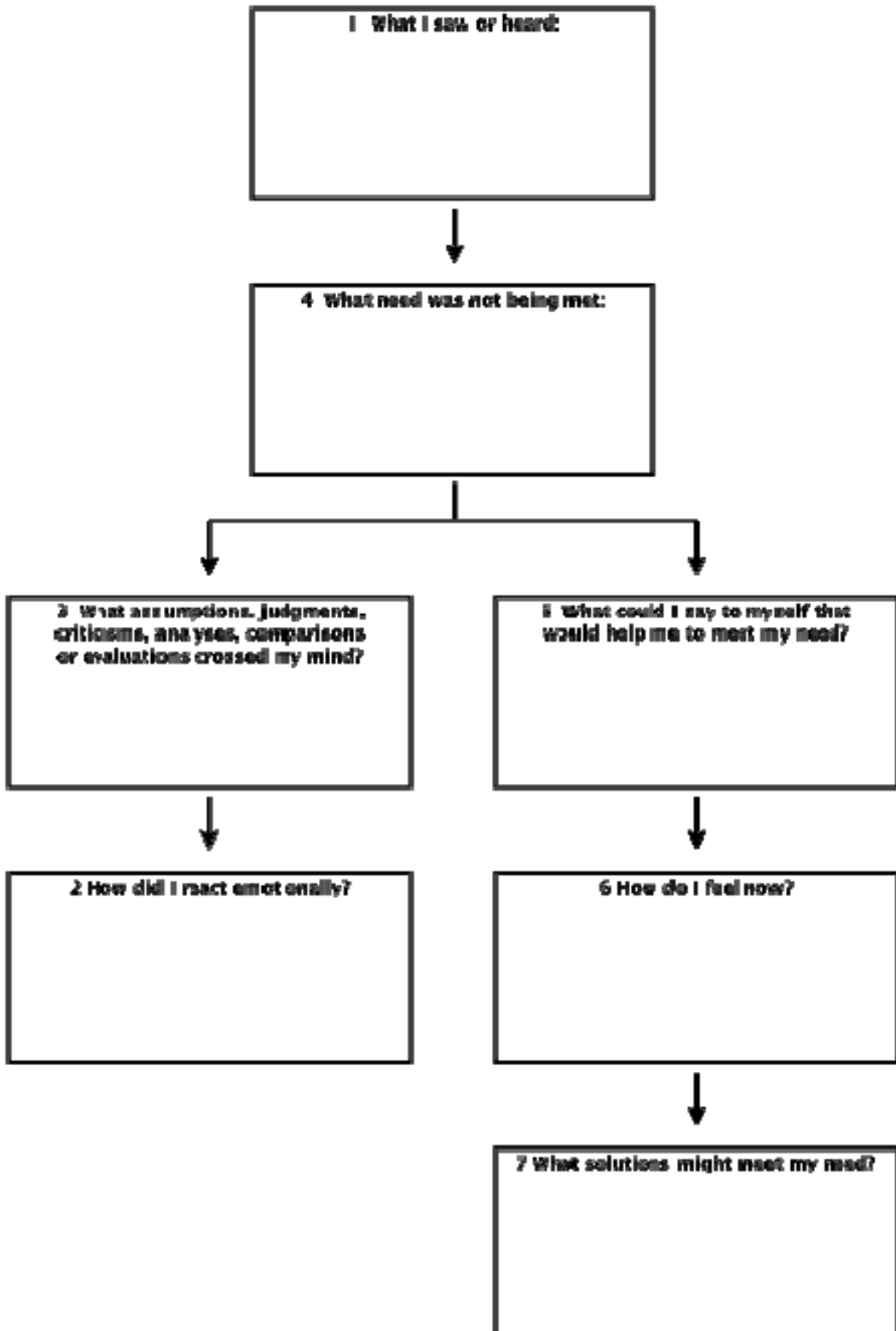
Relate empathically to others

Full expression of our anger requires that the other person truly gets our deeper experience. For them to do that, we need to understand them first. This is particularly true when relating with our children.

- Step 8 *Guess at the other person's needs* behind the behaviour. This replaces your image of that person as 'the enemy' with a vision of a human being who, like you, is just trying to meet his or her needs and make life enjoyable and satisfying.
- Step 9 *Decide whose needs take priority.* Given that only one person can be heard at a time, someone has to speak first and someone has to listen. The person in the most distress will get to speak first. However, given that children's emotions are more intense than ours and given that they will have limited ability to wait for their turn, in conflicts between adults and children, children need to speak first.
- Step 10 *Select a strategy.* Invite them to disclose what they feel and need; listen; then disclose your feelings and needs, asking for their agreement to take some action to satisfy these.
Given that your listeners will not have done the internal work that you completed in the earlier steps, and given that so many of us are used to hearing blame, they may react emotionally. Receive what they say empathically, focusing on their needs and feelings while they are emotional. Guess what action they might like you to take and let them know how you feel about doing it. By listening to their needs, they will learn that their requirements are important to you and will return this courtesy by considering your needs in return.

Source: Klein & Gibson 2005; Rosenberg 2005.

Activity: Transforming anger



ANGER AS A PHYSICAL PHENOMENON

In this paper, I have emphasised how thoughts that are demanding, fake emotions or victim statements can cause an original emotion of hurt or fear to explode into anger. However, it is also important to return to the concept that all emotions have both physical and cognitive (thinking) elements. When you have replaced demanding thinking with realistic thoughts, but continue to find it difficult to manage your anger, it is useful to examine if there is a physical basis to your emotions. In my experience, an accumulation of toxins can strain the body's equilibrium, with those toxins acting as irritants to the brain. Given that the brain has no pain receptors to signal that it is irritated, its only response is to think, feel, or behave emotionally. If this pattern sounds a possibility for you, I recommend bioresonance treatment. Based on biophysics (which is the basis for acupuncture), it uses a computer to detect if your physical system is strained and to treat its causes.

CONCLUSION

It is both natural and human to be angry with your children. However, being such a strong emotion, anger does take careful management and should not be indulged: it is *not* okay to become abusive just because we feel angry.

To manage anger, it can help, first, to recognise that it is not the first emotion that you feel but is a response to an earlier feeling, usually being hurt or frightened. Saying that you were scared or hurt will be more effective than telling children that you are angry at them.

Second, when our children act disruptively, we are usually not angry at them so much as angry with ourselves for not knowing how to respond. Therefore, it would be foolish to display our anger to them, when we are its source.

But third and most important is the recognition that anger indicates that we are analysing or judging – our children or ourselves – and instead need to focus on which of our needs is not being met. Thinking angry and resentful thoughts make it less rather than more likely that our need will be satisfied; therefore, instead we need to harness the energy behind the anger and channel it into expressing our feelings and needs.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Klein, S. & Gibson, N. (2005). *What's making you angry?: Ten steps to transforming anger so everyone wins*. La Crescenta, CA: Puddle Dancer Press.

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.

Rosenberg, M.B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life*. (2nd ed.) Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press.

Rosenberg, M.B. (2005). *The surprising purpose of anger: Beyond anger management: Finding the gift*. Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press.

www.louiseporter.com.au

Centre for nonviolent communication: www.cnvc.org

Bioresonance treatment: www.bioresonance.net.au

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Gonzalez, J.E., Nelson, J.R., Gutkin, T.B., Saunders, A, Galloway, A. & Shwery, C.S. (2004). Rational emotive therapy with children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 12 (4), 222-235.

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ANSWERS:

Distinguishing feelings from thoughts

Feelings 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 15

Thoughts

Demanding thinking: 3, 9, 12, 14 (because guilt is demanding thinking applied to oneself: 'I shouldn't have done that') and 16 (because anger is a judgmental thought, not a feeling)

Fake feelings: 1, 6 and 10

Victim statements: 8 and 13