

# **Brain Change Curriculum**

For

## **Domestic Violence Offender Treatment**

**13, 26, and 52 Sessions**

In association with the  
National Anger Management Association

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**13, 26, and 52 Sessions**

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## Preface

This volume represents the culmination of our providing anger management and domestic violence counseling for almost thirty years. Our main excitement, though, lies in our merging that knowledge with the wealth of information emerging from the field of neuroscience about how our brains work and, most importantly, how we can consciously and quite deliberately change the very structure of the brain. For example, the volume of brain matter increases substantially in areas in which someone chooses to practice a new skill.

Analogically, if you were looking for this volume as if it were a building, you would locate it at the intersection of streets labelled “anger management”, “domestic violence” and “neuroscience.” This is not a particularly easy place to find, though. For one thing there is a historical distance between the fields of anger management and domestic violence, primarily a result of the original domestic violence paradigm, namely the Power and Control Model. This model emphasized the sociocultural aspects of domestic violence while relegating anger management (as well as couples counseling and psychotherapy) to supplementary status at best. Fortunately, the resultant unfortunate gap between the two fields is gradually shrinking as practitioners realize that they overlap substantially.

Another reason that this intersection has been hidden is that there is relatively little research on how the brain processes anger, at least as compared with how it processes fear. Here, though, it is helpful that anger and fear share many similarities in their brain circuitry, as noted in the well-known “fight or flight” reaction to threat.

We attempt in this volume to interweave the fields of anger management, domestic violence and neuroscience while delivering a practical, useful product facilitators can immediately use with participants. It is important to note that neither facilitators nor participants need become experts on the brain in order to utilize this material. We have minimized the use of complicated or esoteric terms. Do clients really care that the name for the cells that cover a neuron’s axons with a layer of fat are called oligodendrocytes? Probably not. But they do care that they can increase the efficiency of those neurons by creating and implementing their very own brain change plan. That is what we present here.

## A note of Appreciation

We wish to express our great thanks to **Richard Pfeiffer**, currently serving as the President of the Board of Directors of the National Anger Management Association (NAMA). Rich is our intellectual colleague and great friend. He has steadily encouraged us with his calmness, his clarity of thought and his willingness to embrace new ideas.

<b>Program Description.</b>	<b>Page 5</b>
<b>Participant Contract</b>	<b>Page 11</b>
<b>Log Book – Homework Assignments</b>	<b>Page 13</b>
<b>Session by Session Descriptions</b>	<b>Page 14</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>Page 163</b>

## 52 Session Domestic Violence Program Table of Contents

Session:

1) Orientation.	Page 14
2) Negative effects of domestic violence on self.	Page 17
3) Changing what you do: behavioral interventions to eliminate domestic abuse. (#3 of 52 week program).	Page 20
4) <b>Brain change</b> : what is it? how you can develop an individualized brain change plan.	Page 25
5) Presentation of your <b>brain change plan</b> and group review.	Page 31
6) Stress management.	Page 33
7) Changing how you think: cognitive interventions to eliminate domestic abuse.	Page 35
8) Reconstructing the scene: exactly what happened on the day you got physical.	Page 39
9) “ “ “ “(Continuation). <b>Brain Change Review #1</b>	Page 41
10) Taking a look at your past while taking 100% responsibility for the present.	Page 41
11) Substance abuse and domestic violence.	Page 43
12) Anger Stages and Styles	Page 48
13) Creating a safe world for yourself and others. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #2</b>	Page 52
14) Shame and pride: the pride circle.	Page 55
15) Dealing with resentment and hate.	Page 59
16) What I’ve done and what’s been done to me.	Page 61
17) Rage <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #3</b>	Page 65
18) Positive couples relationships.	Page 72

19) Trauma/witness to violence.	Page 77
20) Mindfulness.	Page 81
21) Fair fighting/conflict resolution. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #4</b>	Page 83
22) Why did I commit an act of domestic violence?	Page 85
23) Empathy and active listening.	Page 88
24) Values clarification.	Page 91
25) Jealousy and relationship insecurity. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #5</b>	Page 93
26) Positive parenting.	Page 97
27) Taking 100% responsibility for what you did and are doing now.	Page 99
28) <b>Final First Brain Change Report.</b>	Page 102
29) <b>Brain change:</b> what is it? how you can develop an individualized brain change plan.	Page 103
30) Presentation of your <b>second brain change plan</b> and group review.	Page 104
31) Behavioral changes review. How have you been doing with these skills?	Page 104
32) Cognitive Interventions (Added material)	Page 107
33) Attachment styles/Trust. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #1</b>	Page 110
34) Sex, intimacy and sexual abuse.	Page 114
35) Stress reduction revisited.	Page 116
36) Substance abuse and domestic violence revisited.	Page 116
37) Oppositionality vs. cooperation. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #2</b>	Page 116
38) Anger styles revisited.	Page 119
39) PTSD.	Page 119
40) Resentment and hate II.	Page 121
41) Creating a safe world for yourself and others revisited. Optimism and gratitude. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #3</b>	Page 121
42) Selfishness, selflessness, and mutual caring.	Page 123
43) The big three: depression, impulsive anger/aggression and binge drinking	Page 125
44) Emotional intelligence.	Page 127
45) Saying “No” to mutual escalation. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #4</b>	Page 129
46) HALT: hungry, anxious, lonely, tired.	Page 132
47) You at your best: a look at character strengths.	Page 134
48) I love you: how to say it, show it and take it in.	Page 137
49) Respect: Partner’s bill of rights. <b>BRAIN CHANGE REVIEW #5</b>	Page 139
50) The arts of negotiation and compromise.	Page 143
51) <b>Final brain change report</b> for those completing the class; Challenges for others.	Page 145
52) Helpful and unhelpful relationship thinking patterns/relapse prevention.	Page 147



## Program Description

**General format.** The following volume contains three domestic violence offender agendas: a) a 13 session educational program intended for clients with a minimal history of physical aggression within or outside the home; b) a 26 session program intended for a mixture of less assaultive and more assaultive individuals (especially useful in communities or organizations that can only implement one program; c) a 52 session program intended for individuals with more severe histories of domestic violence and other assaultive or physically violent behaviors. Note that each program's agenda is constructed to make best use of the allotted time: therefore the first 13 sessions of the 26 and 52 session programs do not exactly match those of the 13 week program, etc.

The 52 session table of contents and all 52 exercises will be presented first. The 13 and 26 week tables of contents will follow in Appendix A. In order to avoid unnecessary duplication, each of these sessions will be linked with the appropriate session in the 52 session agenda. For example, session number 10 of the 13 week program, "changing how you think," is the same as session number 7 of the 52 session program. Note that certain essential sessions are presented twice during the 52 session program.

Most sessions' format in this manual begins with an explanatory section intended for the facilitator, followed by handout material intended for group members. Handouts may be simply informational or they may ask clients to rank order different concepts or write answers to particular questions. Some sessions also include suggestions for group activities or homework assignments.

**Brain Change Plans.** These three domestic violence offender treatment programs are focused upon the concept of brain change. We emphasize this idea for two primary reasons. The first reason is that there is substantial evidence-based research that indicates adults of all ages (and mental capacity) can consciously restructure the circuitry in their brains to alter how they think, feel, and act. For example, someone who has been very critical of others can learn how to be less

critical and simultaneously to give others more praise. The brain is quite modifiable through three main processes: *myelination* (in which the axons of neurons become insulated and then can transmit electrical information more quickly and efficiently; *long-term potentiation* (here neurons become better at passing chemical information across the small space –the synaptic gap – between neurons); and *arborization* (the dendrites of neurons become denser and become able to make more connections with other neurons, thusly increasing the size and influence of the targeted brain circuits). Two critical principles commonly cited in neurological research are relevant with this audience: “use it or lose it,” meaning that over time relatively unused brain circuits become weaker while relatively well-used ones become stronger, and “neurons that fire together wire together,” which means that clients can consciously increase the speed and power of specified brain circuits through practice. We add a third principle: “Real brain change takes real effort: commitment, time, thought and practice.”

The second reason to focus upon brain change has to do with client motivation. Our experience is that many, if not the majority, of domestic violence offender group members seem to be constitutionally oppositional and defiant towards authority. In other words they simply hate being told what to do or what changes they must make in their lives. As one of our clients put it, “I’ve been put in four groups but I never finished any. They tell me what to do and then I do what I want.” But we don’t tell our clients what to change. They tell us by creating and implementing a brain change program that fits their needs. One client may choose to develop his empathy skills while another practices developing her patience. Recently a client chose “Be nice to my family – I’m tired of being a bully” while another selected “Be positive” and a third “People can change but I can’t make them change,” which happened to be an excellent choice for this highly controlling individual. All we insist upon is that their brain change program should help lessen the risk of recidivism. We believe they know better than we do what they need to do to become less violent.



We provide information about brain change in several sessions. However, *neither you nor your clients need to become neuroscientists to implement this program*. That's because we provide a rough approximation of myelination, long-term potentiation and arborization with three simple concepts: *build* a plan, *improve* that plan over time, and *expand* the plan into new areas. Clients build a plan by naming it and deciding what they most need to do to get their program started. They improve it by practicing regularly. They expand it by connecting their initial area of effort with other brain circuits. For example, Charlie names his plan "Gaining self-respect" and explains that his lack of this quality has contributed to his "don't ever leave me" acts of domestic violence like stalking his ex-partner. Charlie then begins building his program with a simple affirmation: "I'm a caring and competent human being" that he says to himself out loud several times a day. He improves his plan by "doing things the way people who feel good about themselves do things" such as calling his two estranged children to reconnect with them and then "not having to just talk about myself but really taking an interest in what they are doing. As I've learned to respect myself more I've also learned to respect others." Finally, he expands his program: "And now I am starting to feel more secure. I am becoming someone who can both give and receive love. I realize I have just as much to offer a woman as she has to offer me. I am in a new relationship and for the first time I don't feel scared all the time that she will leave me."

Once clients decide what direction to take they can truly change how their brain functions. However, we do emphasize that brain change doesn't happen overnight. One must be highly committed to the task to make lasting change. The payoff is great, though, and well worth the effort. Eventually improved brain circuits develop until what had at first been awkward and slow effort ("I don't know what to say when I try to give my son praise") becomes quick and graceful ("Now giving praise feels natural – it's being critical that's not so easy to do any more").

Brain change is introduced to clients at the fourth session of all three programs. Participants are expected to bring their brain change proposals to the group for consideration at

the fifth session and to immediately begin implementing their plan if approved. Note that *participants in the 52 session program will undertake two brain change plans* (assuming that groups meet once a week), the second one beginning at week 29.

It is essential that you review your client's progress regularly during the weeks that follow. You can do that by: a) asking clients during check-in about their plans (ask for specific examples); b) making brain change a mandatory part of their log books; c) periodically scheduling brain change reviews for the entire group that replace standard check ins on that day. We have scheduled brain change reviews once a month (assuming again that your group meets once a week) on the table of contents for each group. There are several different reviews to help keep up interest in the program. Note that participants in the 13 session program have only one review session. All three programs finish with a Final Brain Change Review that takes place the week before graduation. The brain change reviews are listed in Appendix B.

Important: On the week prior to a scheduled brain change review each participant must be given the appropriate review document. If clients are given a separate participant manual with the brain change reviews included then you should show them exactly which review is due the following week.

What if you are facilitating an *open enrollment group* so that some clients are just beginning while others are farther along and some are nearing graduation? You need to be flexible and you also need to keep careful track of where each individual is in his/her brain change program. New participants should be briefed on the brain change expectations and given all appropriate brain change materials in their fourth week. They then must present their plan to the group during their fifth session. On the week prior to a scheduled brain change review each participant must be given a review document that matches their time in the program.

A list of excellent resources on the subject of brain change is provided in Appendix C.

**Gender-Inclusive.** Research indicates that there are few substantive differences between treating male vs. female domestic abuse offenders. This manual is appropriate for both genders.

**Check-Ins.** Each session should begin with a check-in process during which all members discuss what has happened in their lives since the last session. Bear in mind that some people love to talk as much as others hate to talk. It is important to contain the talkers while encouraging the non-talkers. Trivial topics should not be allowed too much time but remember that people's day to day lives often seem unexciting and that very lack of excitement may be a sign of positive change (from "drama"). Also, it is not uncommon that a participant will ask for or need time from the group to discuss a major issue (for example, one client asked for feedback on his plan to write nasty things about his ex-wife on his Facebook). Our policy is to take whatever time is needed to process legitimate concerns and emotional account situations, since doing so considerably lessens the risk for acts of domestic violence. Our belief is that group process takes precedence over content – as long as the process enhances the members caring for each other and involves productive problem solving.

**Log books and homework.** A simple log book format is provided after this section. Participants will be expected to enter items into the log book between group sessions. We suggest that the log book be kept varied to maintain interest. You can prescribe specific homework assignments to be done in the log book. If clients have created a brain change plan progress with that plan should be included in the log book. It is important that you regularly collect log books from the clients and that you quickly read them, comment on their work and return them by the next session. However, not all log books must be collected every time. You could develop a regular rotation so clients know when they must turn in their books.

**Permissions and Recommendations.** You have our permission to duplicate 1-3 of the handouts and quizzes in this manual. However, we reserve the copyright on the entire book and require facilitators to purchase the manual rather than duplicate large portions or the entirety of it. We

also recommend that you have clients purchase the appropriate participant manual (there are three of them: 13, 26 and 52 session variants) which we offer at a relatively reduced price. These manuals contain all the handouts and quizzes participants will need for each session. Pages come with three holes so they can be taken out of a binder and handed in as requested. As above, you may duplicate 1-3 handouts or quizzes but not larger portions or the entirety of the manuals.

**Participant Contract.** Participants must agree to certain terms in order to participate in group programs. These are listed in the form of the following contract.