ANGER MANAGEMENT USING THE ACTOR’S SKILLS AND GENERAL SEMANTICS

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THE ACT COOL TO STAY COOL curriculum was devised by this author and taught to third to fifth graders in New York City Public Schools in the fall of 2005. When this curriculum was presented to teachers and counselors in the form of model classes, the general response was that the material would be excellent for adults as well. The ACT COOL TO STAY COOL curriculum helps students and adults improve their anger management skills by using both general semantics formulations and the techniques of the professional actor.

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The professional actor learns how to quickly manage emotions on stage and in front of a camera. Professional acting training includes many of the basic concepts found in the formulations of general semantics. Actors learn to view human beings as “organisms-as-wholes-in-different-environments.” They also learn how thinking or self-talk produces both emotions and behavior. General semantics provides the tools to improve one’s self-talk and emotional-management, which in turn promotes a rational and productive way of “acting in the world.”

What follows are some excerpts from the ACT COOL TO STAY COOL curriculum, which incorporates general semantics tools and formulations into five sequential steps for school children and adults.

OVERVIEW OF ACT COOL TO STAY COOL

STEP ONE: Put Your Body and Mind into “Actor’s Neutral.”

“Actor’s Neutral” is a form of semantic relaxation that helps us delay old brain reactions so that the neocortex — the brain’s rational center — can take over more quickly.

STEP TWO: Identity Your Feelings. Think of Yourself as a Character. What is Your Character Feeling?

Students imagine themselves as characters in different situations to more objectively or extensionally take stock of their own emotional lives. This process allows students to observe, test, and evaluate their feelings through the safety net of role play.

STEP THREE: Talk Yourself Cool To Manage Emotions.

Students learn to delay their reactions and to manage their emotions through self-talk, using The “Extensional Actor’s” Internal Dialogue, which focuses on “facts,” and includes such GS tools as “Et cetera,” “Indexing,” and “Dating.”

STEP FOUR: Stand in Someone Else’s Shoes — Developing Empathy.

The Mirroring theatre game helps students become more aware that we all have unique nervous systems. Although we share certain similarities, we also see and act uniquely, so we have much to offer one another.

STEP FIVE: Act Cool to Handle Relationships More Effectively.

Students try out a variety of extensional lines and actions to handle “difficult” people.
EXCERPTS FROM ACT COOL TO STAY COOL

STEP ONE: Put Your Body and Mind into “Actor’s Neutral.” (A semantic relaxation exercise.)

Directions: When you first begin to feel upset, put yourself in Actor’s Neutral (eyes straight ahead, eyelids relaxed, chin down, shoulders down, breathe deeply.) Actor’s Neutral calms one down much faster than deep breathing alone. It is the best posture for thinking clearly and staying cool. And it showcases your personal strength and self-respect. Try it out it with a partner.

Discussion: When we become stressed out or angry, our body often reacts by the eyes widening, the chin pointing upward, and the shoulders hunching. We also breathe more rapidly and shallowly. This kind of sustained muscular tension helps to maintain high levels of cortisol and other “fight or flight” hormones in our bodies. Using Actor’s Neutral helps to delay or reduce such “old brain” or signal reactions so that the neocortex (the brain’s newer, rational center) can take over as soon as possible.

STEP TWO: Identify Your Feelings. Think of Yourself as a Character. What is Your Character Feeling? (Observe, experiment, evaluate.)

Identify Your Feelings, Exercise A — Your Very Own Anger Fairy Tale

Directions: Read through the fill-in-the-blank fairy tale once or twice before you begin writing or have the teacher read it out loud to the class. Take a couple of minutes to think about the character you would like to create. Is your character human, animal, vegetable, alien, supernatural, or other? What situation(s) is your character facing? What is your character feeling? Then fill in the blanks. If you need to adjust the overall wording to help your story make sense — feel free to do so. When you finish, take turns reading the fairy tales in class.

Discussion: What kinds of things made the different “fairy tale” characters angry? In addition to anger, what other emotions could the characters have been feeling when they got upset? Did you find any common themes about anger, sadness, or frustration in all the stories? When you find yourself in a “difficult situation,” it is a good idea to identify how you are feeling (frustrated, hurt, scared, angry, anxious, sad, etc.). Feelings are part of being human. We don’t want to eliminate or ignore our emotions; we want to understand and manage them better. What or who can the characters in the fairy tales really control in their lives? What or who can we really control in our own lives?
Your Very Own Fill-In the Blank Anger Fairy Tale

Once upon a time there was a nice little ________ who became very, very angry when ______________________________.
The little ________’s mind felt like ______________________________.
The little ________’s body felt like ______________________________.
And the nice little ________ started acting like ______________________________.
And then the poor little ________ did the following. He/she/it ________.
The little ________ only calmed down when ______________________________. Afterward, when it was all over, the little ________ felt like ______________________________.
Then she/he/it went home and ______________________________.

The End

Identify Your Feelings, Exercise B — Role Play

Directions: Students divide into small groups, and act out or improvise the scenes below in front of the class. Students can create additional scenes to act out from situations suggested by the class.

Discussion: Describe what you think the different characters in the scenes below might be feeling when they got “upset.” Be as specific as you can. Remember, we can experience more than one emotion at a time (anger, frustration, hurt, sad, depression, etc.). What do you think were some of the reasons the characters in the scenes had trouble handling these situations?

Scenes to Act Out (observe, experiment, evaluate)

- A student walks down the hall at school and says “Hi” to another student, but the second student doesn’t smile or say anything. The first student gets “upset” in front of the other students and adults.
- A teacher calls on a student in the classroom to answer a question. The student doesn’t know the answer, gets “upset,” and then runs out of the classroom. (Tip: Students shouldn’t really leave the classroom during a role play. Explain to the students how to pantomime opening a door and how to pretend to run out.)
- A student in the lunchroom thinks another student is giving her/him a dirty look. The first student gets “upset” and tells his/her friends.
A parent is trying to help their son or daughter work on a math problem at home. The child tries to figure out the correct answer, but can’t do the problem at the moment. Both the child and the parent get “upset.” They disturb the other family members.

STEP THREE: Talk Yourself Cool To Manage Emotions and Motivate Yourself.

The “Extensional Actor’s” Internal Dialogue focuses on “facts” and using GS tools such as “Et cetera.” Even though you may feel angry, frustrated, anxious, or sad, you can still motivate yourself and manage your emotions by talking yourself cool.

Directions: Students take turns reading the following extensionally-oriented scripts or lines to talk themselves cool. After all the lines are read out loud in class, students can discuss which lines they think would be best for the characters they played or wrote about in the previous exercises. Students can then write and share their own extensional self-talk scripts.

Talk Yourself Cool … Exercise A — Stick to the “Facts” (instead of relying on Assumptions, Wishful Thinking, or Catastrophizing)

- I can’t control others, but I can control myself — that’s personal power.
- I have control because I can talk myself cool using rational thoughts.
- I can have strong feelings but I don’t have to get upset. I can act cool instead.
- I can still think and act cool even when other people think and act “un-cool.”

Discussion: How would you define the word “control”? How would you define “self-control”? In your opinion, how does self-control demonstrate one’s personal power and self-respect? What are some of the reasons why it is impossible to control others? What are some of the different ways we can control ourselves for personal power and self-respect? If we let other people get us “upset,” are we giving up our personal power and self-control? If we give up our personal power and self-control, will others respect us less?
**Talk Yourself Cool … Exercise B — Working with the GS Tool, “Et cetera.”**

- I am a multi-dimensional person.
- I cannot be defined with a single label or word.
- I am a student, daughter/son, athlete, singer, honor student, bilingual, etc. (For this line, use words that describe how you see yourself.)
- I have my own unique nervous system and my own personal strengths. Everyone else has their own unique nervous system and personal strengths.

**Discussion:** The most common mistake made by young actors is to attempt to create characters based on a single quality or one-dimensional stereotype. For example, if a young actor reads a script and determines that her character is a “geek,” a “jerk,” or a “nerd,” most likely that actor will attempt to play the part without taking into account the other aspects that fill out the role — the “et cetera” and the “and so forth” that make up a complete human being. The role will be boring and fake for both the actor and the audience.

In “real life,” we sometimes also make the mistake of “name-calling” or using one-dimensional or stereotypical labels to describe others and ourselves. But since we are all multi-dimensional beings, name-calling or referring to others and ourselves by single labels is irrational and inaccurate. Using a mental or silent “et cetera” or “etc.,” at the end of our thoughts and sentences encourages us to think about ourselves, other people, and the world at large, as being multi-dimensional, which is accurate.

**STEP FOUR: Stand in Someone Else’s Shoes — Developing Empathy for Others.**

In order to understand and play different characters, an actor needs to be willing to stand in another person’s shoes, to see from a different point of view. The “Mirroring Game” exercise is used as a warm-up in acting classes and professional training programs. This exercise also helps students become more aware of the non-verbal cues that indicate how others may be feeling.

**Stand in Someone Else’s Shoes … Exercise A — The Mirroring Game**

This exercise can be done in a regular classroom with students standing next to tables or desks. Simply alert students to pay attention to their surroundings.
Directions: Ask students to pair up, preferably with someone they do not know well. If there is an odd number of students, one group may include three members (they become a three-way mirror). Face your partner(s), standing one to two feet apart as if you were looking into a mirror. Decide who will lead first. The leaders will then begin to move in any way they would like (while staying basically in one place). Their goal is not to fool their partners, but to move in such a way that their partners are able to follow them instantaneously. The goal of the followers is to attempt to imitate or mirror their leaders as exactly as possible including their facial expressions and attitudes. The partners should stop and switch between leader and follower roles several times.

Discussion: While the followers are obviously focusing on the leaders, the leaders must also focus on their followers to make the exercise work. In other words, to accomplish this exercise, all the participants must constantly demonstrate an interest in and focus on their partners. And to have the most enjoyable time, partners must anticipate each others’ moves by attempting to “get in their heads.” The willingness to experience or understand another person’s way of moving and thinking in the world is one of the keys of empathy training. Did you note that all participants may be performing the exact same exercise, but each one executes it according to their own unique “character”? Every leader moves differently, and every follower has their own version of the leader’s movements. In general semantics terms, this demonstrates that we all have “unique nervous systems.”

STEP FIVE: Act Cool to Handle Relationships More Effectively.

Directions: Students can try out a variety of extensional lines and actions to handle “difficult” people and situations more effectively. Students also can create their own extensional scripts following the models below. Finally, students can test out their extensionally-oriented lines and actions by redoing the role play scenes from Step Two.

Act Cool to Handle Relationships — Scene A

Someone does something “un-cool” like teasing, gossiping, or bullying.

First action:
Stay calm using Actor’s Neutral. It demonstrates your personal strength and power.

First line choices:
I don’t listen to teasing/gossip/rumors, it’s a waste of time and “un-cool.”
That’s just bully talk, it’s not cool. Our school does not allow it.
Second line choices:
Repeat the following lines as neutrally as possible like a “broken record.”
*It’s not cool. It’s a waste of time.*
*That’s just bully talk.*

Final action choices:
Avoid arguments that go nowhere. Most of the time, you won’t be able to reason with people when they are in the middle of irrational actions like bullying, gossiping, or rumor-spreading. So why bother?
Walk away proudly in Actor’s Neutral and Talk Yourself Cool.
Tell an adult about the problem as soon as possible.

Act Cool to Handle Relationships — Scene B
A fellow student, friend, or relative gets upset at you.

First action:
Use Actor’s Neutral. Remain calm.

First line choices:
*I understand.*
*I can imagine how you feel.*
*SOMething like that might get me upset too.*
(“Don’t forget, empathy is the quickest way to calm others down to have a rational discussion, even if they are “in the wrong.””)

Second line choices:
*I see your point. I apologize.*
*I’m sorry, I’ll try to do better.*
*Now that you brought it to my attention, I realize I made a mistake.*
(“We all make mistakes. To err is human, to forgive — divine. The quickest way to resolve a conflict when one is “in the wrong” is to admit to the mistake and apologize.”)

Third line choices:
*Let’s think about a positive way to solve the problem.*
*Let’s talk about it more later when we are both calm.*
*Thank you for the information.*
*I’ll think about it.*
*I agree with part of your criticism, but I would like to explain my point of view.*
(This last line is an example of an “agree and correct” strategy. First agree to some part of the other person’s criticism or request that you can find reasonable or accurate. Then correct any misconception.)

**Final actions:**

Stay in Actor’s Neutral and remain calm.

Repeat any of the above lines if necessary. Avoid pointless arguing.

Talk yourself cool.

If the other person is still angry or very upset, leave and ask an adult for help.

**Final Comments**

As noted, when we taught this curriculum in the form of model classes to teachers and counselors in the New York City public schools, the general response was that the material would be excellent for adults as well. Children and adults learn ways of thinking and behaving from every interpersonal communication they encounter — in school, at home, and in the larger world. With this in mind, some extra “rehearsal time” in the area of anger and emotional management would behoove us all. As the great Bard said, “All the World’s a Stage.” We have an opportunity not only to “act” on that stage, but to positively “direct” the life dramas we bring to it.