



# Responding to Anger and Violence among Multicultural Youth

## Overview

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to provide general information on anger and violence and specific information on some of the social issues that are contributing to anger and violence among refugee and migrant youth. This Fact Sheet is based on "Seeing RED: A Facilitation Manual for Responding to Anger and Violence Among Culturally Diverse Young Men", which was developed by MYSA in collaboration with Shopfront Youth Health and Information Service. The Seeing RED program was initially developed by Shopfront for mainstream youth and was culturally modified by MYSA for refugee and migrant youth. The complete Seeing RED program, including anger management group work sessions for young men, can be obtained by contacting MYSA.

## Is it Anger or is it Violence? What is the Difference?

### What is Anger?

Anger is a normal emotion that is experienced by everyone. Anger, like other feelings, is driven by emotional, physiological and cognitive elements (Deffenbacher & McKay, 2000). It is a legitimate response to experiences of abuse or injustices by others and is closely aligned with many other emotions such as fear, hurt, disappointment, frustration, powerlessness, humiliation and so on (Trudinger, 2000). Physical aspects of anger are triggered with fight/flight reactions that ready the body to respond to threats and stresses. While the physiological experience of anger varies for person to person, the following are common sensations and reactions:

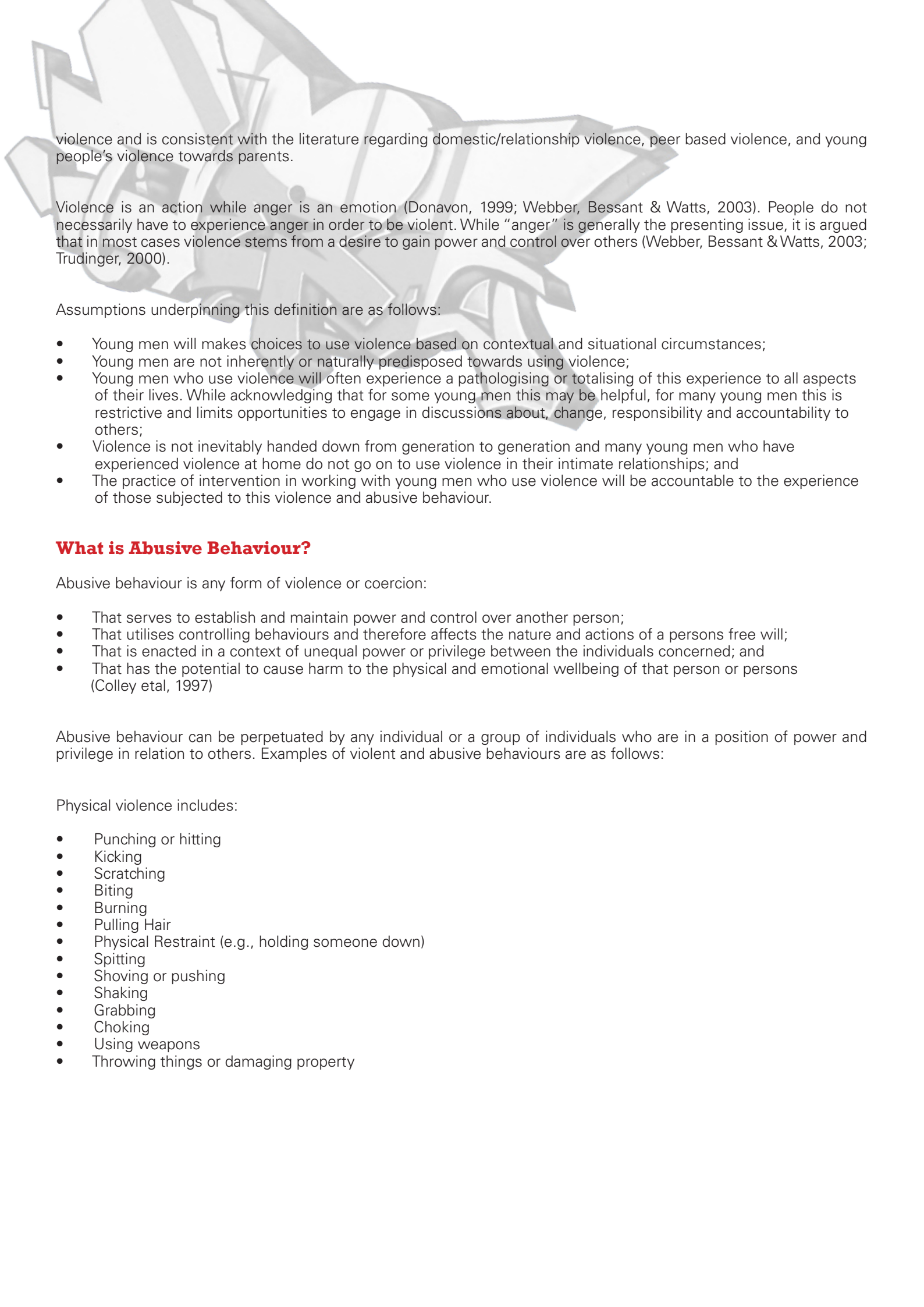
- Heart rate and blood pressure increase;
- Breathing often shifts to short shallow breaths;
- Heart palpitations;
- A sense of pounding in one's head;
- Increase in body temperature and reddening of skin;
- Increase in muscle tension, clenched jaw, clenched fist, shoulder tension;
- Trembling, and a sense of restlessness and/or agitation as a result of the adrenal glands release of adrenalin, noradrenalin, and various corticoid steroids;
- Increase in sweat and/or cold clammy hands;
- May experience an exaggerated 'startle response' (eg may be jumpy) and increased anxiety levels;
- Some people experience nausea, stomach upset or diarrhoea; and
- Insomnia.

If anger is experienced frequently or last for long periods of time it may also manifest itself physically in, for example, migraines or tension headaches, grinding of one's teeth and ulcer flare ups (Deffenbacher & McKay, 2000:1-2)

People express the emotion of anger in various ways, both helpful and hurtful. Helpful strategies may include taking 'time out', engaging in conflict resolution strategies/processes, physical activity and channelling anger as a motivational tool. Unhelpful and violent expression or suppression of anger can have significant impacts on the health and well being of young men and can lead to the formation and interaction of unhealthy patterns of behaviour.

### What is Violence?

Violence is any act which harms, intimidates, threatens, establishes and maintains power and control over a person or group of people via use of one or more forms of abuse including: physical, verbal/emotional, psychological, social, sexual, financial, and spiritual. This definition incorporates a wide range of contexts in which young men use and experience



violence and is consistent with the literature regarding domestic/relationship violence, peer based violence, and young people's violence towards parents.

Violence is an action while anger is an emotion (Donavon, 1999; Webber, Bessant & Watts, 2003). People do not necessarily have to experience anger in order to be violent. While "anger" is generally the presenting issue, it is argued that in most cases violence stems from a desire to gain power and control over others (Webber, Bessant & Watts, 2003; Trudinger, 2000).

Assumptions underpinning this definition are as follows:

- Young men will make choices to use violence based on contextual and situational circumstances;
- Young men are not inherently or naturally predisposed towards using violence;
- Young men who use violence will often experience a pathologising or totalising of this experience to all aspects of their lives. While acknowledging that for some young men this may be helpful, for many young men this is restrictive and limits opportunities to engage in discussions about, change, responsibility and accountability to others;
- Violence is not inevitably handed down from generation to generation and many young men who have experienced violence at home do not go on to use violence in their intimate relationships; and
- The practice of intervention in working with young men who use violence will be accountable to the experience of those subjected to this violence and abusive behaviour.

### **What is Abusive Behaviour?**

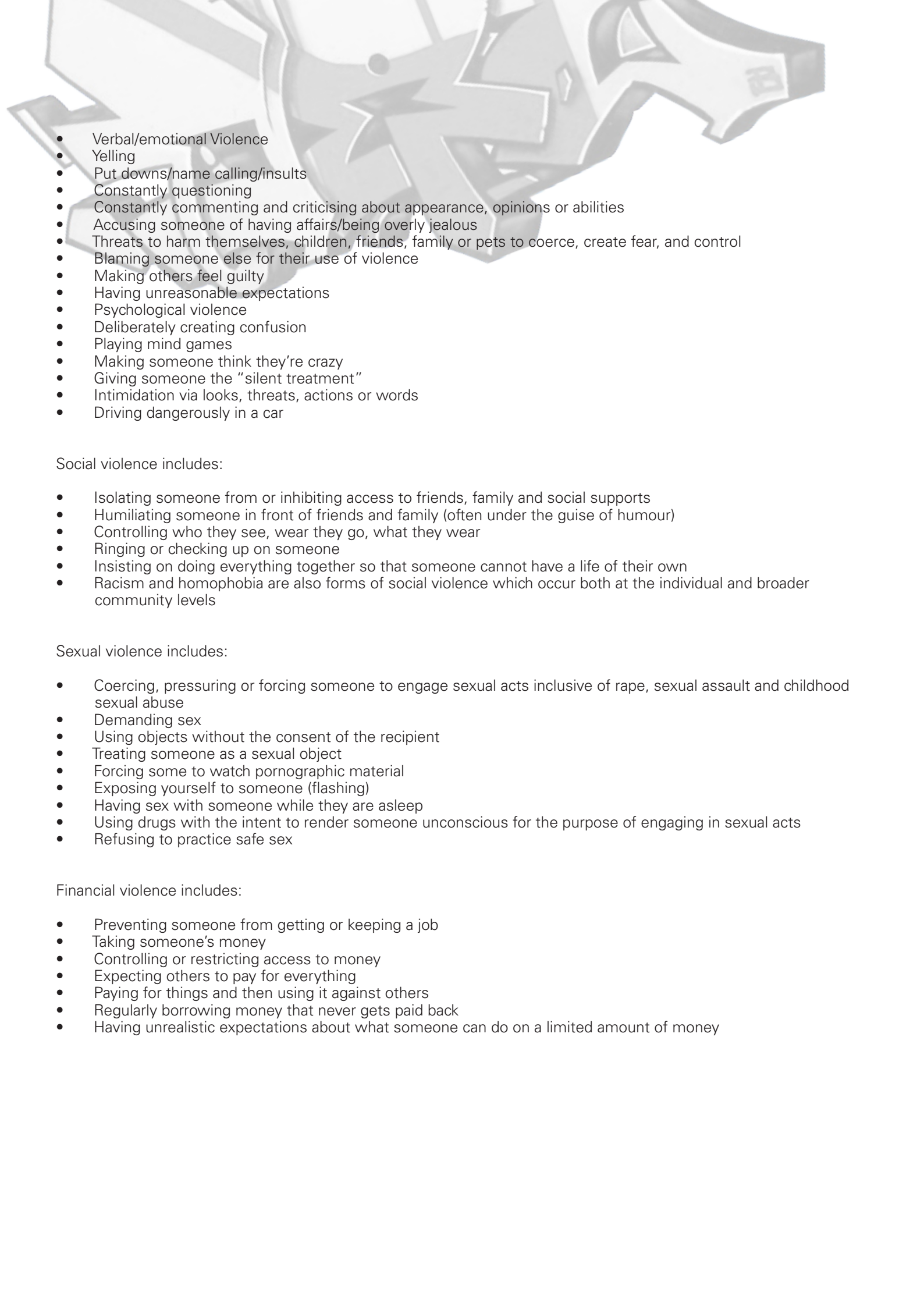
Abusive behaviour is any form of violence or coercion:

- That serves to establish and maintain power and control over another person;
- That utilises controlling behaviours and therefore affects the nature and actions of a person's free will;
- That is enacted in a context of unequal power or privilege between the individuals concerned; and
- That has the potential to cause harm to the physical and emotional wellbeing of that person or persons (Colley et al, 1997)

Abusive behaviour can be perpetuated by any individual or a group of individuals who are in a position of power and privilege in relation to others. Examples of violent and abusive behaviours are as follows:

Physical violence includes:

- Punching or hitting
- Kicking
- Scratching
- Biting
- Burning
- Pulling Hair
- Physical Restraint (e.g., holding someone down)
- Spitting
- Shoving or pushing
- Shaking
- Grabbing
- Choking
- Using weapons
- Throwing things or damaging property

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- Verbal/emotional Violence
  - Yelling
  - Put downs/name calling/insults
  - Constantly questioning
  - Constantly commenting and criticising about appearance, opinions or abilities
  - Accusing someone of having affairs/being overly jealous
  - Threats to harm themselves, children, friends, family or pets to coerce, create fear, and control
  - Blaming someone else for their use of violence
  - Making others feel guilty
  - Having unreasonable expectations
  - Psychological violence
  - Deliberately creating confusion
  - Playing mind games
  - Making someone think they're crazy
  - Giving someone the "silent treatment"
  - Intimidation via looks, threats, actions or words
  - Driving dangerously in a car

Social violence includes:

- Isolating someone from or inhibiting access to friends, family and social supports
- Humiliating someone in front of friends and family (often under the guise of humour)
- Controlling who they see, wear they go, what they wear
- Ringing or checking up on someone
- Insisting on doing everything together so that someone cannot have a life of their own
- Racism and homophobia are also forms of social violence which occur both at the individual and broader community levels

Sexual violence includes:

- Coercing, pressuring or forcing someone to engage sexual acts inclusive of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse
- Demanding sex
- Using objects without the consent of the recipient
- Treating someone as a sexual object
- Forcing some to watch pornographic material
- Exposing yourself to someone (flashing)
- Having sex with someone while they are asleep
- Using drugs with the intent to render someone unconscious for the purpose of engaging in sexual acts
- Refusing to practice safe sex

Financial violence includes:

- Preventing someone from getting or keeping a job
- Taking someone's money
- Controlling or restricting access to money
- Expecting others to pay for everything
- Paying for things and then using it against others
- Regularly borrowing money that never gets paid back
- Having unrealistic expectations about what someone can do on a limited amount of money



Spiritual violence includes:

- Denying someone the right to practice their spiritual beliefs
- Harassing someone based on their spiritual beliefs
- Being forced to practice spiritual beliefs that are not one's own
- Using religious teachings to justify violent and abusive behaviour

### **Anger and Culturally Diverse Young Men**

While CALD young people, particularly refugees, are believed to be at increased risk of a range of social and behavioural problems, including anger management problems, there is very little ethnic-specific, much less youth-specific, research in the area. Most research interest has centred on Western populations. However, some Australian studies have been undertaken and these reveal that many young refugees experience social, emotional and behavioural problems associated with a range of pre and post migration stressful experiences. Pressing needs have been identified in the areas of loss and trauma, cultural transition, housing, education, employment, family support, general wellbeing and access to services.

A recent South Australian study (Opi, 2007) investigating the issues facing young refugees and their families found that young people face numerous challenges in relation to employment, education, English language proficiency, discrimination, accommodation, sport, feeling accepted, media representation, and family conflict. Eighty percent of the 84 parents interviewed reported that they had no control over their children. They felt the legal system was too liberal and that the police did not consult with them about their children. Consultations with schools revealed that young refugees, particularly those in the first year of resettlement, frequently got involved in fights and that a significant proportion of young males lacked respect for female teachers and students.

A West Australian study (Ernest et al., 2007) found that refugee students are often angry and that it does not take much provocation for them to reach heightened anger levels. Pre-migration factors, particularly trauma, combined with post-migration factors such as low socioeconomic status, language barriers, and increased family responsibilities, were found to contribute to presenting problems.

In another Australian study, Cottone (2004) found that refugees are at increased risk of disengaging from education and training due to a range of pre and most migration factors including torture and trauma, little or no previous schooling, various resettlement difficulties, lack of access to appropriate counselling for previous traumatic experiences, limited access to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, culturally insensitive teachers and education system, perceived racism from teachers and intergenerational conflict.


Elsewhere in the literature it has been noted that failing at school is a humiliating experience for young refugees and can lead to depression, drug use, aggression, participation in criminal gangs and street violence (Fangen, 2006).

In a NSW-based study, Sowe (2005) found that some young refugees learn aggressive conflict management styles in refugee camps and subsequently experience adjustment difficulties after arrival in Australia. This aggression, coupled with difficulties at school, were identified as important risk factors for drug use and abuse. Consistent with other Australian research, this study also found that many young refugees struggle with pre-migration trauma and loss, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues.

In MYSA's experience, a number of factors can lead to, or exacerbate, anger management and other behavioural problems in some young refugees.

### **Pre-Migration Experiences of Loss, Trauma, and Disruption**

Many young refugees have witnessed and/or experienced traumatic events including, but not restricted to, rape and



sexual assault, amputation, witnessing family being murdered or mutilated, family disappearances, being a child soldier, starvation, witnessing massacres and imprisonment. The effects of these experiences can vary depending on the young person and can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other social, behavioural and mental health issues, and are exacerbated by lack of access to counselling and other support services. There is often considerable stigma associated with emotional and behavioural problems, including anger management problems, so young people may avoid seeking professional help and resist efforts to enrol them in programs.

### **Resettlement Issues**

While adjusting to life in a new country can be very difficult to any migrant, it is especially difficult for refugees who have been subject to forced migration. Young refugees in the initial stages of resettlement have to contend with many difficult issues including learning a new language, adjusting to a new culture and its systems, making new friends and, for many, helping parents and caregivers cope with previous trauma and/or cultural transition. This is on top of multiple losses including home, country, culture, family and friends.

### **Family Issues**

Young refugees often have family responsibilities which can affect many aspects of their lives including education, work and developing social networks. These responsibilities may include undertaking significant household duties, caring for siblings and other family members and providing support to parents struggling with pre and/or post migration experiences of loss and trauma.

As young people generally adapt to mainstream Australian culture and acquire English language skills faster than their parents, they may also be expected to help them with the settlement process, including orienting them to mainstream systems and norms, escorting them to medical and other appointments and providing translating and interpreting assistance. This support may be provided for a number of years.

Family responsibilities can prevent or limit a young refugee's ability to participate in community life. They can also result in family conflict, with young people resenting the impact the added responsibility has on their education, work and social life, and parents feeling disempowered by what they perceive as a reversal in roles.

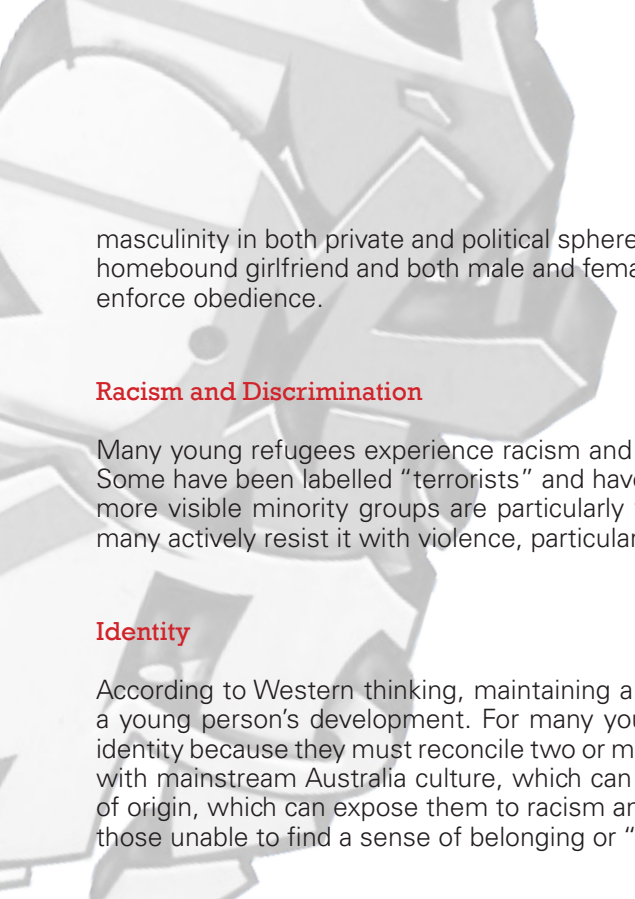
Unlike most migrants, for refugees there may also be issues associated with the loss of or forced separation from family members, particularly for those who experience long periods of separation from family.

### **Intergenerational Conflict**

Many young people from refugee backgrounds, irrespective of whether they were born in Australia or elsewhere, face considerable family pressure in their struggle to live between cultures and develop an identity that is acceptable to both themselves and their families. Family tension and conflict often centres on a young person's level of freedom and independence, with parents and caretakers attempting to restrict their dress, behaviour and activities.

### **Gender Relations**

Another issue contributing to anger management and other behavioural problems among some young refugees concerns culturally prescribed gender roles. Many refugees come from societies where gender inequality is firmly entrenched in social relations. Research from Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa (Silberschmidt, 2001, Campbell 1992), for example, has described a "crisis of masculinity" where some men reassert their masculinity and raise their self-respect through violence, sexual relations and alcohol. Campbell (1992) found that violence was used by men of all ages to reassert their



masculinity in both private and political spheres. Young men stressed the importance of appearing to have an obedient, homebound girlfriend and both male and female respondents confirmed that violence was a common strategy used to enforce obedience.

### **Racism and Discrimination**

Many young refugees experience racism and discrimination at school, university, work and in the general community. Some have been labelled “terrorists” and have endured open hostility from members of the public. Young people from more visible minority groups are particularly vulnerable. While young men’s reactions and responses to racism vary, many actively resist it with violence, particularly if the racism itself involved violence.

### **Identity**

According to Western thinking, maintaining a strong sense of self and identity, including cultural identity, is critical to a young person’s development. For many young refugees, however, there can be significant conflict around cultural identity because they must reconcile two or more very different cultures. Some try to resolve this difficulty by identifying with mainstream Australia culture, which can result in family conflict. Others respond by identifying with their culture of origin, which can expose them to racism and discrimination, especially if they belong to a visible minority group. For those unable to find a sense of belonging or “fit” to any culture, there may be considerable stress and alienation.

### **Economic Hardship**

Young refugees often live in families experiencing significant economic hardship as a result of unemployment or under-employment due to little or no former education, lack of recognition for overseas qualifications and work experience, lack of local work experience and references, limited knowledge of the Australian employment system and racism among employers.

In 2005, Bagdas (2005) presented a paper at the International Conference on Engaging Communities which highlighted the ways in which adult unemployment affected the whole family. It was explained that male unemployment in particular often led to shame, a loss of self-respect, and a loss of respect from others, as did accepting a job significantly lower in social status than what was held in the home country. Long-term unemployment was reported to lead to intergenerational conflict due to children pressuring parents for money they are unable to provide.

In MYSAs experience, economic hardship places additional stress on already stressed young refugees for four main reasons:

- Many young people need to send money out of Australia to parents and/or other family members. Young people, particularly males living in female headed single parent families, are also expected to provide for family living in Australia.;
- Young people soon adapt to the Western lifestyle of consumerism and want to fully participate but many are unable to due to limited finances.
- Young people who are dissatisfied with their current living arrangements need money to be able to move out. Dissatisfaction is usually due to family conflict, crowding, emotional and physical abuse and a desire for more freedom and independence.
- Inability to manage Centrelink payments. At the age of 16 years, young people are entitled to Centrelink payments. Some young people who live independently spend this money on clothes, cars, mobile phones and entertainment, leaving nothing for other essential living expenses.



## Tips and Pointers for Managing Anger and Aggression

While the following tips and pointers are effective for managing most anger and aggression issues, young people with severe and persistent problems may benefit from participation in the Seeing RED Program.

These tips and pointers are based on a strengths-based approach to practice. Strengths-based approaches rest on the assumption that even youth with the most difficult issues and problems have inherent strengths, resources, capacities, and resiliencies that can be utilised to help them grow, develop, and take control of their lives.

- Help the young person to identify the underlying causes of his or her anger. Anger often stems from feelings of rejection, perceived failure, pressure and stress. It is therefore important to identify and understand the underlying issues.
- Help the young person to express anger in socially acceptable ways. Helpful strategies may include expression via journaling, drawing or another creative form, taking 'time out', engaging in conflict resolution strategies/ processes, physical activity and channelling anger as a motivational tool.
- When faced with an angry young person, keep in mind that the heat of the moment and his or her emotions can make it very difficult for them to hear what you have to say, regardless of how important it is. It is therefore important to consider the most appropriate time to share your concerns - you may need to wait for another time when they are more open.
- Establish clear boundaries. Make rules for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour but do not make too many rules and ensure the ones you do make are consistently enforced. There should be consequences for unacceptable behaviour and these should be explained to the young person ahead of time. Consequences need to be expected, immediate and consistent with the behaviour.
- Understand that the young person's anger is not the sum of who he or she is; they have skills, knowledge, strengths, talents and achievements which can be harnessed to support them to identify their own solutions to problems.
- Be aware that young people's behaviour is generally linked to broader environmental issues which are outside of their control, for example, the refugee experience, difficulties at school or at home, and feelings of isolation and exclusion. This is not to suggest that unacceptable behaviour should be overlooked or excused, but simply to acknowledge the need for understanding and empathy.
- Be attentive and listen to young people – they want to be heard. Even if you disagree with them and their assessment of what is causing the behaviour, listen to them. Feeling unheard is a key source of much frustration and can cause young people to behave in ways that place them at further risk.
- While workers and young people often have different views about what the focus of intervention should be, the focus should be on how young people see their situation, what they see to be their needs, and what they want to see change. Most young people with anger management problems will not want to sit around talking about their issues; they will want their worker to provide practical support and concrete outcomes, not only because they have pressing needs, but because this indicates they are being cared about and taken seriously.
- Look for opportunities to build young people up - tell them what is good about them, focus on their strengths and capacities.
- Encourage young people to share their interests, goals and aspirations and provide concrete and tangible opportunities for them to pursue them.
- Assist young people to make links and connections in their areas of interest so they can find a sense of belonging and fit with the wider community.
- For serious and persistent anger management or behavioural problems, consider seeking advice from a mental health professional as behavioural problems often mask mental health issues.
- Recognise that extra time, commitment and patience is required to work effectively with young people and that you may need to arrange opportunities to debrief with your supervisor or manager.



**Where Can I find More Information?**

Multicultural Youth SA (MYSA)

Telephone: 8212 0085 (business hours)

Website: [www.mysa.com.au](http://www.mysa.com.au)