

The anger-management scam

By ANN ROSEN SPECTOR

WHAT THE @\$^\$^# are anger management classes? It seems like almost every day we're hearing about some notable, including our very own local heiress Susan Tabas Tepper, being assigned to them.

Judges across the U.S. are mandating them instead of jail time. So - what are they?

Well, for one, they're an unregulated, unevaluated, non-standardized but thriving industry.

Did your hot-dog cart go belly up? Start an anger-management program and market the @\$^\$ out of it. Get downsized from Enron/Tyco/WorldCom? Well, start an Anger-Management.com franchise.

What about a therapist with real training - say, a Ph.D. with years of supervised training who's been licensed by the state? Overqualified for running anger-management classes. Anyone can do it - so why get training or certification? That would be too @(!@% time-consuming. It's like being a "life coach": just a handy dandy little seminar or two, and you're good to go.

With such quickie fix-it programs, is it any wonder that these celebrities keep acting out again and again and . . . ?

Let's look at a few recent episodes for which anger management or cushy rehab was the treatment of choice:

- * Tepper cops a plea for hitting an ex-housekeeper and has now been alleged to have hit a nanny and her 9-year-old child.
- * Alec Baldwin screams at his 11-year-old daughter during a cell-phone call, "You're a pig!"
- * Naomi Campbell throws cell phones at her employees.
- * Russell Crowe throws a phone at a hotel employee.
- * Axl Rose bites a security guard.
- * Michael Richards shouts racial epithets at comedy-club hecklers.
- * Mel Gibson hurls anti-Semitic insults at a police officer.

* Foxy Brown attacks a manicurist in Manhattan, and then, apparently, the staff at an anger-management clinic in Queens.

Even better (you can't make this stuff up), there's a new talent agency in Los Angeles called Anger Management Agency Inc. According to founder Candice Stockwell, it gives stars "more specialized attention . . . We coddle them at times, but that's our job."

If you look at the behavior I've listed above, and separated it from the names behind them, you'd see most of them for what they are: criminal assault.

Of course, if you didn't know the age of the perpetrators, they'd sound more like temper tantrums. Toddlers get a time out for tantrums, and we try to teach them how to handle the situations better. But adults acting like toddlers need way more help than programs with glossy brochures.

To be honest, there are many times when we all feel like smacking someone: Our boss, the idiot in the car in front of us, the incompetent person on the (and I use the term loosely) customer-service hotline, the supercilious snob seating people at the restaurant . . .

But we don't. We use restraint.

And if we're unable to use what trained therapists call "mature coping mechanisms," we need therapy. Not a pill, not three handy-dandy classes, but some real work to understand why we act in such an immature way. Why we feel so powerless that we have to act out against people who are truly less powerful than us, and can't hit back: children, servants, service employees.

The clinical term is displacement - taking a low sense of self-worth, a high degree of self-loathing and fear of never getting the proper recognition, and, instead of working through the issues that cause you to feel that way, attacking someone who is unable to fight back.

It's a manifestation of depression, which is a largely under-diagnosed and untreated illness in our country. And we can't cure it by drive-through treatments. *

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Marriage, beyond Tinseltown

By ANN ROSEN SPECTOR

IDON'T know about you, but I'm upset about the breakup of Britney and Kevin, Jessica and Nick, Reese and Ryan. And I don't even actually know who Ryan is.

And if I were you, I wouldn't order anything monogrammed for Tom and Katie. That marriage has disaster written all over it!

Of course, we don't know why they broke up. We don't know that about most marriages, of famous people or people we actually know. The interior picture of the marriage is often quite different from the public side we display.

But why do so many marriages in the public eye seem to melt even before all the presents are unwrapped? Well, for some of the reasons that non-celebrity marriages do. We too often get married for the wrong reasons.

We get married because we think we've found our soulmates. Remember, if you add up all the soulmates of Liz Taylor, J. Lo. and Madonna, we have enough people to field a football team. And what exactly is a soulmate? Your one true perfect match? (I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I hear that one.)

There are more than 6 billion people in the world - yet you found your soulmate in your very own ZIP code. Or high school. Or freshman English class. That's remarkable. Astounding. Inconceivable.

But if you get married for that reason - and add in "We're so much in love," "I've never felt like this before," "The best sex I ever had" and "We have so much in common" - you're bound to think marriage is going to be easy. Because with all those factors, not to mention all that love, there'd be nothing to fight about.

Or have to work on. Or change, especially about yourself. Well, it doesn't work like that.

Marriage ceremonies almost always contain some version of "for better or for worse." And there's a reason for that. There are going to be tough times ahead. That's a guarantee. Bad reviews, career slumps, parenting demands, illness, a host of other difficulties.

So what do you do then? Bolt? Or grow up, and fight for the marriage? Or, why not learn how to actually deal with those problems effectively? In almost 30 years of couples counseling, I'm still amazed at how poor most people's skills are in this area.

In fact, if I'm ever made the Czarina of Matrimony, no one could get married unless they knew how to fight fairly and effectively with each other. That is, not just fighting, but solving the actual problems so that you don't have to have the same fight over and over and over again.

But that's lots of work, so when the going gets tough, the tough get going - right out the door.

And, of course, not only in Tinseltown, but everywhere else in the USA, marriages are huge productions. People spend more than a year planning them, because the bridesmaids' dresses have to match the flowers, which have to match the tablecloths... There are huge numbers of magazines and TV shows on how to have the perfect wedding. It's every woman's chance to be a princess, if only for a day.

Or even longer, if we count all the other hoopla: the engagement party, the wedding shower, the bachelor/bachelorette parties. More and more opportunities to shower attention on "me."

But people don't spend much time planning the actual marriage, which, after all, is why you have the wedding. To be an "us." Day in, day out. Of course it has its special moments, but it's also filled with the mundane. Laundry, garbage, food preparation, bills... seeing each other not only in party attire, but in ripped underwear, throwing up.

Perhaps if we focused less on the ideal mate, and more on the actual person, we'd have more marriages on solid ground.

A wedding is play-acting: costumes, sets, props, music. When we leave the set, without our agent, publicist, personal assistant and the rest of the entourage, we have to return to the place where we are merely a spouse (and perhaps a parent). I may be a movie star (that's what I do for a living), but playing house does not work at home.

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