

39. Anger or Frustration

Anger is an entirely natural and normal emotion – parts of our brain are devoted to it. The key function of anger is to provide us with a vital boost of physical and emotional energy, so that we can fight back when we feel threatened. Accordingly, anger is a natural and very understandable response to a diagnosis of cancer. For instance, a person might feel a sense of injustice to have developed a life-threatening illness, despite their best efforts to stay healthy or lead a morally good life (hence the question “Why me?”). People may feel resentful that they or someone they care about has cancer, whilst others around them are well. Anger might be directed at the healthcare system, or one might be feeling deeply frustrated at the losses brought about by the illness (e.g. mobility, future plans, driving licence, appearance changes etc.). In addition, people sometimes become angry or frustrated at other people’s responses to cancer (See *Relationship with other Relatives or Friends* elsewhere in this directory). Anger and irritability are also more common when people are physically or emotionally exhausted, which is a very common consequence of cancer and treatment. Finally, and most common of all, people often feel a powerful mixture of anger, anxiety and fear all at the same time. Fear and anger are our basic threat emotions and, in many ways, are two sides of the same coin (the ‘fight-or-flight’ response). The result is that one emotion is often felt and expressed instead of the other.

It’s helpful to learn how to work with anger because, if it is left unmanaged, it can have a negative impact on our mental and physical health as well as our relationships. We might think of anger in terms of ‘*under-controlled*’ behaviour – the irritable comment, the object thrown across the room. Equally, however, anger is ‘*over-controlled*’ – for example, when we don’t express our anger but spend hours seething instead, or rehearsing arguments or statements ‘to put someone in their place’. Some people even believe that *feeling* anger is unacceptable, so they can become frightened by their angry thoughts and desires.

Either way, poorly managed anger can disrupt our relationships; it can wear us down over time and lead to anxiety, depression and feelings of guilt. Often the chain of events leading to an angry outburst occurs so quickly and automatically that we are not fully aware of the causes, signs or triggers. Managing our anger is about recognising, understanding, and altering this sequence of events. The following suggestions should prove helpful.

How can I manage these feelings?

- Talking to others can reduce feelings of anger; bottling things up tends to result in increasing tension and pressure. Talking to someone about your concerns can really help. This might be a family member or close friend, but you may find talking to a professional first makes easier. Just putting one’s feelings into words can help.
- Try to identify and express the feeling *beneath* the anger – e.g. feelings of anger can sometimes cover up a feeling of hurt or rejection or fear. In these circumstances, it can be much more helpful to say, “It really hurts me when you say that”, rather than reacting angrily and risk causing further conflict and distress.
- Relatives and friends may not realise that your anger is about the illness and not against them. If you can, try to explain this to them at a time when you are not feeling quite so angry and distressed. Or write them a letter.
- Try to anticipate situations where you are more likely to react with anger or frustration. Examples might include busy or noisy environments, fatigue at the end of the day, or ‘hot’ topics which cause an intense emotional response. Think about ways in which you could influence or change these situations in order to make them less stressful – e.g. turning off the television when you have a conversation with someone, or undertaking tasks when you are feeling less fatigued.
- Learn to identify your early warning signs of rising anger. These may include body signals (muscle tension, clenching fists), thought signals (thoughts racing, jumping to conclusions), and behaviour signals (voice getting louder, pointing your finger).

- Develop simple coping strategies – or a '*calming routine*' – to use when you notice yourself becoming tense, frustrated, or angry. An example could include: (1) Speech – speak slowly in a calm voice; (2) Relax your muscles – drop your shoulders, loosen your hands, relax your jaw; (3) Slow breathing – take 2 or 3 slow, deep and even breaths from your stomach, not your chest; (4) Distraction – count to ten or imagine a safe, peaceful scene.
- Be prepared – prepare and rehearse how you will respond in challenging situations. One method is to prepare positive self-statements – this involves identifying key thoughts that you can write down and then repeat to yourself at times of high stress, tension or provocation. For example, 'don't take it personally'; 'this is a real challenge – treat it as a challenge'; 'it's OK – stay calm, let it go, walk away'.
- Learn and practise relaxation techniques – e.g. soothing breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation (see below)
- Leave the situation if necessary – if you feel you are 'losing it', then remove yourself from the situation calmly before an angry outburst occurs. Perhaps engage in a relaxing and distracting activity (e.g. a short walk, listen to music), and try to notice your levels of tension and anger gradually reducing.

Several counselling services are available offering free, confidential sessions to anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis. It can also be helpful to join a support group where you can talk to people who may have experienced similar problems (see below and the appendix at the end of this directory for further information about local and national resources).

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Counselling service within the support centre at Derriford and the outreach Triangle Centres. Available for cancer patients, their carers and families</p>	<p>Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre One hour appointments See counselling service leaflet for further details 01752 430060</p>
<p>Livewell South West: Panic This workshop aims to break down some of the myths surrounding panic and help you to manage your panic attacks.</p> <p>Mindfulness Mindfulness practice can help you develop the ability to deal with life's pressures. Mindfulness meditation is a skill you can develop and a form of self-awareness training that helps you get to know yourself more fully, think more clearly and in the present moment.</p> <p>Managing Anxiety This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety and strategies to manage this including breathing, goal setting and cognitive behaviour therapy</p> <p>Managing Low Mood This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological symptoms of low mood as well as providing strategies to manage this</p> <p>Managing Stress This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p> <p>Sleep Feel, Feel Well Introduces ways to support restful sleep</p>	<p>Livewell South West: To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p>Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
<p>Other Resources</p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, District Nurse, Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist.</p>

National Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Macmillan Cancer Support Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.</p>	<p>www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)</p>