

39. Anger and 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.

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- 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).

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

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Local Resources:

Cancer Care Counselling Service The Fern Centre North Devon District Hospital Raleigh park Barnstaple Devon EX32 4JB	Jess French, Lead Macmillan Cancer Care Counsellor Tel: 01271 334472 (ext. 5672) Email: ndht.cancercarecounselling@nhs.net Web: https://overandabove.org.uk/fern-centre/ Self referral or though your CNS or keyworker
Other Resources	Your GP. Oncology doctor, clinical nurse specialist or keyworker

National Resources:

NHS 111	Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.
NHS Website	Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing.
Samaritans https://www.samaritans.org/	When people feel listened to, it can save a life', confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair Tel: 116 123(free 24hr helpline)
Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 — Monday – Friday 9am—8pm	Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230
Macmillan on-line Community	Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!
Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support	Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday

Other Resources :

Macmillan Booklets:	Cancer and complementary therapies PDF— MAC11645
	Managing the symptoms of cancer MAC11671
	How are you feeling? PDF— MAC11593_E05_N
	Understanding chemotherapy MAC11619_E15
	Understanding radiotherapy PDF— MAC11640_E12_N