

HOW TO DEAL WITH ANGER

Anger is a common emotion expressed by cancer patients and their families. A person with cancer may be angry about the way the diagnosis has affected his or her life and relationships with others. Anger can be expressed in a positive way or in an unhealthy way. As someone who will be in direct contact with both patients and their families, it is important for you to know how to handle anger in an appropriate and professional manner. Here are some strategies to consider.

- **Don't take it personally:** Your first reaction, when confronted by an angry patient or family is to get angry back. Remember that the person may not be angry with you but with issues related to the diagnosis, including loss of control, financial stressors, family pressures, treatment side effects, and more. Allow the person to vent without interrupting for about 60 to 90 seconds. If this is the first meeting with the patient or their family, use your name to reinforce that you are a person like them—not an institution. When speaking, use a soft tone to help move the person toward a calmer place. Try to get the person to sit down as this strategy can also diffuse some of the anger. The calmer you can remain, the more effective you will be in getting the person to a less angry place.
- **Acknowledge the anger:** Another common response is to physically or psychologically withdraw from the situation, which might only anger the person more. It is important to demonstrate that you understand why the patient is angry. Use active listening to understand the issues behind the anger. Personalize the conversation by using the person's name. It is critical to acknowledge feelings so the person feels that he or she is being heard and that someone is listening.
- **Take the anger seriously:** Never dismiss the person's anger as not important, even if their response seems out of proportion. Ask questions to better understand where the anger is coming from. To help you identify the underlying cause is of their anger, use phrases such as, *"Tell me more about how this situation came about?"*
- **Work toward resolving the issue(s) (if possible):** Once you determine the source of the person's anger, ask yourself if this is an issue that you can realistically resolve. Remember: positive action can help ease and reduce anger. For example, if the person is angry because he or she had to walk so far from the patient parking area, make appropriate suggestions and offer workable solutions. Nothing can be more difficult for a patient in active treatment than to add to their fatigue. If your cancer center has valet parking, suggest this option. If the patient's family is driving, suggest dropping the patient off first at a closer location before parking the car. Suggest using a wheelchair once the patient enters the building to conserve precious energy. Offering multiple alternatives gives back control to the patient and their family.