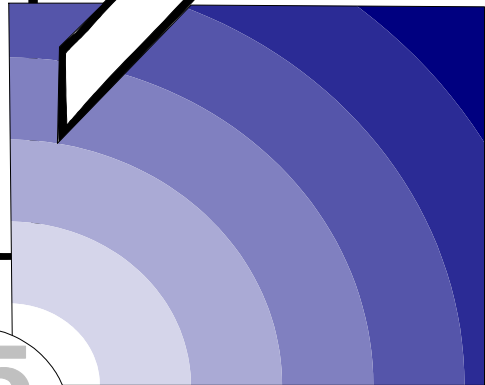
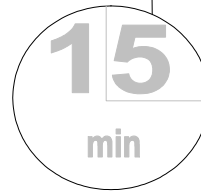


CLIP

15 minute Worksheet



Psychological needs

5: Helping the angry person

Intermediate level

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Aim of this worksheet

To understand the principles of helping the angry person and to avoid escalation

How to use this worksheet

- You can work through this worksheet by yourself, or with a tutor.
- Read the case study below, then work on the questions overleaf.
- The work page is on the right side, the information page is on the left.
- Work any way you want: you can try answering from your own knowledge (in which case fold over the information page), you can use the information page (this is not cheating- you learn as you find the information), or you can use other sources of information
- It should take you about 15 minutes. If anything is unclear, discuss it with a colleague.
- If you think any information is wrong or out of date let us know
- Use the activity on the back page and take this learning into your workplace

Case Study

John is a 46 year old man, married with two children. He initially complained of increasing weakness in his legs. Always an anxious man, at first this was put down to stress. When the weakness worsened, however, investigations and examination by the neurologist suggested motor neurone disease, and subsequent progression of the signs and symptoms has confirmed the diagnosis. He wanted to know the diagnosis and was told.

Today he comes in to see you for the first time with his brother, Peter, with whom he is very close. Peter soon starts to demand why his brother wasn't diagnosed earlier, and red-faced with anger starts to blame you for allowing John to get into this state.

Getting started

As in many situations, start by acknowledging what is going on:

- **Acknowledge Peter's anger:** eg. "I can see this has made you angry. How can I help?" While this may seem unnecessary, it gives the person a clear message that you have noticed their anger and that you are taking it seriously. Offering to help starts to defuse the anger.
NB. Peter is expressing active anger, but a few people exhibit passive anger- a sort of controlled anger- and you may have to start by saying, "I get the feeling that you're angry, can we talk about it?"
- **Be aware of what anger does to you:** it is normal for you to be emotionally affected when confronted by an angry person. Some professionals feel irritated in response, in which case they need to suppress this irritation to avoid escalating the anger. Other professionals become shocked at the anger being directed at them, in which case they need to be more assertive in order to be believed and help the angry person effectively. If your reactions make it difficult for you to help an angry person (eg. you become too angry or withdrawn to help effectively) it would be best to ask someone else to see the angry person, and for you to consider getting advice or teaching on your response to an angry person.
- **The setting:** with an angry person it is usually impossible to choose the right setting. If the setting seems particularly awkward (eg. a busy corridor) then as the discussion progresses it is reasonable to suggest an alternative, more private venue.
- **Defusing the anger:** this should have started when you acknowledged the presence of anger- most people want to know that you are prepared to listen and help. They may want help with getting something done or help with information. Exploring the cause of the anger is part of helping to defuse it since an offer of help is not usually rejected.

The appropriateness of anger

- **Discuss the cause** eg. "What's happened to make you feel like this?"
- **Clarify the extent of the anger** eg. "On a scale of 0 to 10, how angry have you been,?"

Most anger is understandable in that a) it's reasons can be understood b) it is understandable that some people in distressing situations become angry.

So, Peter's anger is understandable, but it is not appropriately directed (you are seeing him for the first time), and seems out of proportion to the situation.

Apologising: when to say sorry and when it is not appropriate

When the anger is directed at you, *and that anger is appropriate* then come clean and apologise! For example: "I'm sorry you were kept waiting for so long- it would make me angry too."

When the anger is about the behaviour of another health professional, avoid the temptation to defend that person since a) it's not your place to defend others, and b) trying to defend the other person will fail to defuse the anger and will only result in the accusation that 'You lot all stick together!'. You can still show your concern without being defensive, for example, "I can see why you're angry." Then suggest that they speak or write to the individual to express their concerns.

Escalating anger: an important warning sign

The steps so far should by now have defused Peter's anger *within a few minutes*. At the very least, it should be no worse. Occasionally, however, the anger escalates. If this happens:

- Position yourself by the nearest exit.
- Acknowledge the escalating anger eg. "I can see this has made you very angry."
- Set limits eg. "I want to help you, but your anger is beginning to make me feel uncomfortable. If you don't feel you can control your anger I wouldn't feel comfortable continuing." Giving them 10 minutes to calm down may allow you to start again from the beginning eg. "How can I help?"
- If the person cannot accept the limits, end the interview and leave immediately to avoid being assaulted.

Persisting anger

There are several reasons for persisting anger:

- Sometimes this is a person's normal behaviour.
- There may be a clinical depression.
- Unrealised ambitions eg. seeing children grow up.
- Loss of control because of weakness or immobility.
- Spiritual anger

The last four may need additional or specialist help.

“For 2 months they couldn’t make up your minds what was wrong- now look at the state John’s in! I can’t believe you call yourselves doctors!!”

Reflect

- How does Peter’s anger make you feel?
- What can you do to start helping his anger?

Write

Which of these do you think is true about Peter’s anger?

- | | | |
|--|------|-------|
| The anger is understandable | True | False |
| The anger is appropriately directed | True | False |
| The anger is proportional to the situation | True | False |

How would YOU react?

- Peter angrily blames the GP for the delay in diagnosis. What can you say?
- Peter accuses you of keeping them waiting an hour (you were running 50 mins late). What can you say?
- It’s clear that Peter’s anger is escalating. What can you do?

Reflect

On the next visit, Peter’s anger is less, but is still present. Think about what could be causing this.

FURTHER ACTIVITY: Helping the angry person

Reflect on how you are affected by an angry person:

- do you tend react with anger?
- do you tend to withdraw?

FURTHER READING: Helping the angry person

Journal articles

- Garnham P. Understanding and dealing with anger, aggression and violence. *Nursing Standard*. 2001; **16**(6): 37-42.
- McCord RS. Floyd MR. Lang F. Young VK. Responding effectively to patient anger directed at the physician. *Family Medicine*. 2002; **34**(5): 331-6.
- Robbins PR. Tanck RH. Anger and depressed affect: interindividual and intraindividual perspectives. *Journal of Psychology*. 1997; **131**(5): 489-500
- Thomas SP. Groer M. Davis M. Droppleman P. Mozingo J. Pierce M. Anger and cancer: an analysis of the linkages. *Cancer Nursing*. 2000; **23**(5): 344-9.

Book resources

- Effective Interaction with Patients*, 2nd ed [Faulkner A](#). New York : Churchill Livingstone, 1998.
- Introducing Palliative Care* 3rd ed. Twycross R. Abingdon : Radcliffe Medical Press, 1999.
- Talking to Cancer Patients and their relatives*. [Faulkner, A](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- A Guide to Symptom Relief in Palliative Care*, 5th ed. Regnard C, Hockley J. Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press, 2004
- Oxford Textbook of Palliative Medicine* 3rd ed. Doyle D, Hanks G, Cherny NI, Calman K eds. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2003.

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**Current
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Fifty seven 15 minute worksheets are available on:

- An introduction to palliative care (3 worksheets)
- Helping the patient with pain (9 worksheets)
- Helping the patient with symptoms other than pain (11 worksheets)
- Moving the ill patient (2 worksheets)
- Psychological needs (8 worksheets)
- Helping patients with reduced hydration and nutrition (8 worksheets)
- Procedures in palliative care (4 worksheets)
- Understanding and helping the person with alternative communication (learning disabilities) (5 worksheets)
- The last hours and days (4 worksheets)
- Bereavement (3 worksheets)

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Helping the Patient with Advanced Disease: a Workbook
Regnard C. ed.

Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press www.radcliffe-oxford.com