Difficult Doctor-Patient Interactions

THE ANGRY PATIENT

Anger is the expression of a primary emotion (fear, frustration, insecurity, shame). **Focus on the primary emotion and its cause.**

The Aim of Interaction is to move the pt who is in the throes of a powerful emotion to a calmer place where you can work together.

1. **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF A STRONG EMOTION**
   - Anger aimed at you is an attack – you will feel it as such
   - Reflect on your own feelings – of threat? surprise?

2. **APPEAR CALM, INTERESTED & IN CONTROL**
   - Sit or stand at eye level with pt
   - Look like you are there for a while
   - Avoid interruptions & distractions
   - Use a tone of voice that makes an unspoken statement of support

3. **DETERMINE THE CAUSE OF ANGER**
   - Listen without interruption
   - Accept non-judgmentally what pt says
   - Acknowledge pt’s situation & name the emotion…
     “If I understand correctly, you’re feeling **angry** about not being told about…”
   - Wait in silence for pt’s response to your acknowledgement
   - Do not counter with your own ideas - avoid saying, “yes, but”
   - If you do not understand the source of pt anger, say so…
     “I’m sorry, I’m still a little confused about why you’re so angry. Can you tell me more?”
4. **BE EMPATHETIC & COMPASSIONATE**
   - Show you understand pt’s difficulty & validate pt’s emotion… “I can appreciate how **frustrating** it is when you feel like no one is listening to you”; “I understand that the **possibility of losing someone you love can be frightening**.”
   - Calibrate the emotion - eg. do not use the word “upset” if pt is furious
   - Be prepared to express your understanding several times to diffuse anger

5. **CLARIFY BOUNDARIES & PT EXPECTATIONS**
   - “**What would make you feel better about this now?**”
   - If pt’s expectation is unreasonable, address this and offer an alternative “I understand that you would like me to…since we have never discussed this before, I will have to get more information.”

6. **IF PT IS ANGRY ABOUT SOMETHING YOU DID – CONSIDER APOLOGIZING**
   - Many ‘complaining’ patients say that what they want most of all is an apology

7. **PROBLEM SOLVE TOGETHER**
   - Acknowledge if there is a difficulty for you… “I find it **difficult to proceed knowing we have different views.”**
   - Encourage pt to contribute as an equal. Offer choices
   - If appropriate, offer help in the future… “If this happens again, perhaps we could talk sooner and I could be more helpful.”

**KEY MESSAGE** The best response to anger is to acknowledge its presence, try to understand it, and express a desire to help.  
*Accept the challenge. Be curious – not furious.*

**References:**
