



# Difficult Doctor-Patient Interactions

Division of Medical Education  
Communication Skills Program  
[csp.medicine.dal.ca](http://csp.medicine.dal.ca)  
(902) 494-6307

## 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 & COMPASIONATE

- 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:

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Platt, F., & Gordon, G. (2004). Field guide to the difficult patient interview (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). New York: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins