

Are you having trouble with your temper...?

What is anger?

Anger is a normal human feeling that can range from mild annoyance to intense rage. When we feel angry a number of natural changes occur in our body. Our heart rate and blood pressure rise and stress hormones are released. This can cause a person to shake, become hot and sweaty and feel out of control. When people have angry feelings they can act in ways that are destructive and aggressive. Anger that is out of control can lead to problems in relationships and all other areas of life.

For people living with a brain tumour, outbursts of anger or a general level of irritability can result from injury to parts of the brain that control our impulses. Anger can also result from feelings of frustration at not being able to say what one really wants to say or perform at the level that was possible in the past.

How do I know if I have a problem with anger?

- Physical aggression including hitting, pinching, punching people or things such as walls, throwing things, making aggressive gestures (e.g. shaking fist) or standing too close to others.
- Verbal aggression such as raising voice, swearing, screaming, making critical or abusive comments, insults, making verbal threats.
- Feeling frustrated and finding it hard to cope with or control yourself.
- Irritability, such as having a 'short fuse'.
- Being more snappy or intolerant.
- Harming yourself, for example, banging your head, hitting oneself.
- Acting in a threatening way, for example

raising voice, staring, or making threats to harm other people.

'Adam's' Story

Adam is a 21-year old man with a high-grade tumour (medulloblastoma) was yelling loudly, breaking and throwing objects when he felt angry. He never said sorry for acting this way. Before his diagnosis, his family said that he was very easy to get along with and was happy most of the time. Though he did not threaten his family, he would explode with anger for little or no reason at all. His family felt they had to 'walk on eggshells' all of the time.

Strategies

For the person with a brain tumour

- Make sure you have a routine in your life.
- Try to lower your stress (see Stress fact sheet).
- Keep a check on your fatigue levels (see Fatigue fact sheet).
- Find someone to talk to who will listen openly.
- If you are starting to feel angry with someone, leave the room before you explode, or go for a walk.
- Try to avoid alcohol.
- Learn Anger Management skills (see Anger Management fact sheet).
- Try to spot triggers that set your anger off and try to avoid those triggers when possible.
- Express your anger, rather than bottling it up. Let off steam with someone you can trust, and seek counselling if you feel this will help.
- Be active in sport, housework or go for a walk. This can help to lower some of the stress that feeling angry can cause.

KEY FACTS

A survey of people with a brain tumour found that:

- 29% regularly showed significant levels of verbal aggression.
- 17% threw objects, slammed doors or acted in other physically aggressive ways.
- 24% were irritable, easily annoyed or became impatient for no apparent reason.

- Try to think about the reasons why you get angry. The more you know about the reasons, the easier it can be to spot 'danger situations' before they start, and to take steps to avoid those situations from getting worse.
- Following an outburst, forgive yourself, make any repairs or amends you need to make, try to let go and move on.

For the family member

Anger and frustration are normal feelings for family members living with or caring for someone with a brain tumour. The way people outside the family react can make matters worse, if they do not understand the deeper problems.

- Try to spot the triggers that lead to a loss of temper or irritation. Write them down over a week. Are there any triggers that seem to keep coming up? Is there anything that can be done to avoid or lower the number of times your relative faces these triggers?



- Try to increase the level of routine in the person's day. With more routine, the person with brain tumour is less likely to get angry due to unexpected occurrences.
- Try to gently distract the person from the trigger that is making them upset and focus on something that is enjoyable for them.
- Talk with someone about your own feelings. You may feel hurt, frustrated or feel tired by having to deal with these anger problems.
- Sharing your own feelings with others may help to lower your own level of stress.
- Try to tell yourself that the anger is really not a personal attack on you but is due to the injury that the brain tumour has caused.
- Try not to argue back. If all else fails, leave the room and wait for things to calm down.
- Keeping yourself safe is the first priority – seek help if you get injured.

Questions to ask your health professional

- What is the cause of the anger?
- Is it related to the tumour itself?
- Is it related to the treatments given for the tumour or other medications?
- Could the anger be an unrelated medical condition and does this need treatment in itself?
- Do I/we expect the anger to get better or worse over time?
- Are there any medications that can help the problem?
- Are there any diet or lifestyle factors that can help the anger?
- Will a psychologist be able to help treat this problem?
- Who else could I speak with to help with the anger?

Links to other information:

- http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/anger/
- <http://www.apa.org/topics/controlanger.html>
- <http://braininjury.org.au/portal/fact-sheets/anger-and-brain-injury---fact-sheet.html>
- Resource Sheet – Anger Management.