

FACT SHEET:

Category:
Behaviour

Audience:
Families and
Support Workers

For more information
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Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

Preventing and Managing Anger

Introduction

Anger and aggression are common behavioural concerns after acquired brain injury and can include irritability or snappiness, short temper or fuse (getting angry very quickly), verbal or physical outbursts (yelling, hitting, punching), abusive language (swearing) or threatening behaviour. In more severe cases, it can take the form of physical harm to self or harm to other people or to property.

Like other behavioural changes that can occur after brain injury, there are many causes of anger or aggression, and understanding each cause is important in order to decide what to do

People with an acquired brain Injury may:

- have reduced ability to monitor or control behaviour because of damage to specific areas of the brain e.g. frontal lobes, temporal lobes, limbic system
- become more easily fatigued and overwhelmed and therefore irritable
- be impulsive and have reduced ability to plan and think about what they say or do.
- have reduced self-monitoring or awareness of behaviour and the effect it has on other people so anger may build up quickly, and erupt over small issues or events.
- have difficulties understanding and coping with demands, leading to frustration and anger.
- have limited ability to alter their behaviour or to learn new behaviour, even when aware of their own behaviour
- have reduced coping strategies to deal with loss and grief, frustration, and their inability to do the things they were doing prior to their injury.
- find increased stress, physical demands, and fatigue overwhelming and this can lead to frustration and anger.
- have pain, discomfort may also be a trigger for irritability, snappiness and low frustration tolerance
- continue to use aggression to achieve their goals if this was used in this way in the past
- have their ability to monitor and control anger or aggressive behaviour further reduced by alcohol or substance use

Strategies for Preventing and Managing Anger

Be Aware of Causes of Anger

Anger can be triggered by many different things (see above). Try to understand the possible factors causing the angry behaviour then work out a strategy to deal with it.

Some examples of things that might contribute to or trigger anger problems are:

- Fatigue and tiredness
- Memory difficulties
- Miscommunication
- Frustration with limits and loss of control or independence
- Lower tolerance for change
- Lower capacity to cope with demands
- Certain activities, situations at work, or relationships can be triggers for anger
- Lack of insight about impairments and need for assistance

Remain Calm

When managing aggressive behaviour (agitation, irritability, verbal or physical aggression) it is important that you can remain calm.

What you can do:

- Use a soft calm voice
- Breathe slowly
- Keep a neutral facial expression
- Be aware of your gestures and body language so they are neutral and calm
- Keep a reasonable distance

Prevention and Predictable Problems

- Triggers – work them out, and avoid them e.g. tiredness, certain topics in conversation, clear communication, organised routines and schedules
- Be clear about your role and what you can/can't do so expectations are realistic
- Have consistent arrangements in place for regular set tasks e.g. budgeting, shopping, planning, bill paying etc
- Let people know about changes ahead of time. Predictability reduces stress and irritability.
- Give information and choices
- Take things at the person's pace e.g. take into account cognitive difficulties

Be Respectful

- Use the person's name.
- Treat them like an adult.
- Respect their feelings, thoughts and views. Don't be dismissive, disinterested or patronising, or exclude them.
- Involve in decision making as much as is possible in the circumstances.
- Do what you say you will do - be reliable.

Listen Carefully

Listen carefully to the person and try to find out what is making them feel angry or agitated. If you show your interest, concern and understanding, this may help defuse the anger, and help the person to calm down.

What you can do:

- Empathize with the person –try to put yourself in their shoes and understand why they are angry
- Don't interrupt, correct or argue with the person, listen to what they are feeling or saying
- Acknowledge their feelings or experiences -you don't have to agree, but you should acknowledge why they might be upset e.g. "I can see why you would be angry about that"
- Paraphrase what they are saying to make sure you understand e.g. "So what you mean is ..."
- Clarify what they mean – ask questions that help you gather information
- Listen quietly – don't rush in
- Be prepared to repeat yourself and go over information calmly and clearly
- Be patient – sometimes people just need to let off steam.

Problem Solve

Be solution-focussed with the person to come up with something you or they can do to make things better e.g.

"What can we do about ...?"

"How can we make this work better..?"

"What do you think should happen about ...?"

Redirect

Strategies that defuse or redirect attention may be useful in deflecting anger, this could be:

- Changing the topic, or starting a new activity, or using humour to break the tension
- Moving to a different environment or task can sometimes defuse anger – e.g. sitting rather than standing, making a cup of tea or coffee, going for a walk, getting the mail, making a phone call, turning on some music
- Waiting until a later time to bring up difficult issues or topics
- Asking for more time if you need it
- “I need a minute to think about ...”
- or “I will need to get back to you about this.”

Structure, routine and Predictability

If a person has difficulty controlling emotions and behaviour, try to structure daily activities and tasks as much as possible to reduce the demands on cognitive, communication and behaviour skills.

What you can do:

- Keep demands and expectations realistic – too low or too high can trigger anger.
- Keep the environment as calm and organised as is possible.
- Have a predictable routine.
- Let the person know when and why arrangements may be a certain way or may need to change.
- Be consistent

Disengage

The goal of disengaging is to either remove yourself or the other person from the threatening situation.

What you can do:

- You may be able to suggest that you discuss the matter another time, meet / telephone another time.
- Only disengage when you feel all efforts to listen or to communicate have failed, or where the situation is escalating.
- If behaviour escalates remove yourself and other people from the situation. This makes sure everyone is safe.

- It takes two people to argue, so moving away or leaving a situation may help to calm things down. You can also discuss the issue again at another time.

Don't Take Behaviour Personally

This is easier to say than to do, but it is important not to take behaviours personally, or to emotionally react.

What you can do:

- Stay calm
- Don't express your own emotions or anger
- Avoid getting provoked or angry yourself (see disengaging).
- Remember there will be other times or places to deal with the issues at hand.
- Try not to hold grudges or bring up previous arguments or behaviour episodes—this won't be helpful and may trigger anger.

Ask for Help

Coping with anger can be difficult and stressful for family, friends and carers.

It can help to talk about these feelings and to get ideas and support from others for coping. Don't feel like you have to do it on your own.

What you can do:

- Get more information about brain injury and behaviour
- Access counselling and support to talk about your feelings, reactions, and to get ideas and strategies to strengthen your coping skills
- Talk to other people (family, support workers, therapists) who may have had similar experiences and can give you ideas and support
- Contact specialist ABI services



Resources

See other Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service (ABIOS) Information sheets at <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/>