

Anger and MS: How to keep your anger from ruining your day

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Anger is one of the most difficult emotions for us to handle, and when it is poorly controlled, it can have a ruinous effect on our mood, our relationships, and our self-esteem.

The trigger is a sense of unfairness or injustice: In cognitive therapy, we can identify the thought patterns that underlie our different emotions. Anxiety tends to stem from thoughts linked to fear or uncertainty, depression tends to be associated with a sense of loss, and *anger tends to be triggered by a feeling of unfairness*. Typical thoughts that MS patients tend to identify as triggers to their anger include:

'It's not fair that I've got MS – I've always looked after myself. What have I done to deserve this?'

'Why do I have to undergo another work capacity assessment? I've had to give up my job because of MS, and now they are telling me I have to go to work in spite of my symptoms?'

'I only had a ten minute session with the neurologist – how can he have any idea how I'm feeling?'

'Don't my family realise I'm in pain? I want to enjoy this walk, too. Why don't they slow down so that I can keep up with them?'

You can see from these examples, that each describes a sense of unfairness, due to a sense that our family, our doctors, or the government, are intentionally hurting us.

Taking the sting out of your anger

Assert yourself: One of the best ways to diffuse our angry feelings is to express how we feel. In the above scenarios, perhaps writing a letter to your MP or newspaper, letting a doctor know at the beginning of your session that you've got a list of

questions, or asking your family to slow down for you, would all be assertive and constructive solutions.

Think before you speak: You probably already know that shouting is never an effective tool when you are feeling angry, but sometimes anger escalates before we can pre-empt an outburst. If you find that the same situation keeps recurring, keep a diary and note how you might be able to handle it next time in a more helpful way.

Accept what can't be changed, and focus on what can be: Having a diagnosis can take a long time to accept and adjust to, and often people with MS have stayed angry for years, even though they can't 'undo' their diagnosis. Instead, try to find ways to focus on what you can do to help yourself, physically, socially, or politically. Getting support from professionals about psychological and medical approaches, reading self-help literature, joining an MS group, or becoming a health activist are all within your reach. Taking these steps will help you focus on the present and future instead of dwelling on the unchangeable past.

Breathe...breathe...breathe: There are few more effective ways of immediately calming ourselves than taking a few, slow moderate breaths. Practice breathing throughout the day, using a relaxation app on your phone, or finding a good relaxation script to follow (I am happy to send one if you email me on my website). Once you are skilled in a simple breathing technique, you will be able to apply it when you feel your tension mounting up. Controlled breathing counteracts the stress response ('fight or flight') that produces adrenalin.

Don't brood: It can be tempting to keep silent when we feel angry, hoping that others will read our non-verbal signals, or perhaps even read our minds! This often results in a long, slow, simmering rage, that can sometimes last for days. Brooding maintains anger, and also keeps our adrenalin high so that we cannot relax or let go. Anger also raises our blood pressure, and has long term health consequences if we don't learn how to manage it.

Anger can be constructive and justified: Righteous anger about injustice to ourselves, our family, or our world, can be channelled constructively. *Feeling* angry can be an important warning sign,

but how we *express* our anger will shape how effective we are in explaining how we feel, or what needs to be done.

Do something!: Feeling angry about unfairness is an important human quality which can lead to positive change. This depends on our thoughts, our reactions, and our behavioural response. By learning the art of turning anger into constructive action you will feel in greater control over the challenges of MS.