

Dealing with difficult clients/emotions

ANGER

Stay calm, don't get defensive

Remember that the anger may not be directed at you personally (but it always feels that way). Anger stimulates our "fight or flight" response, but we need to suppress this instinct. Try to breathe slowly, and maintain eye contact with the client.

Listen, and use appropriate body language

Move to a private room if you are in a public area. Try to get the client to sit down, and sit down too. Stop all other activity. Actively listen to the client's story. Nod, take notes (but maintain eye contact), and don't interrupt until they have finished. Discover the client's reasons for their anger. You may need to elicit details of previous visits/experiences. Maintain a professional but caring demeanour – smiling is *not* appropriate in this situation.

Empathise

Finally, when responding, start with expressions of empathy and agreement. You may need to delve deeply to find some common ground, but you may say something like, *"I can see that you are very angry that this has happened, and I'd like to help to sort this out."*

Accept responsibility/apologise

This may have nothing to do with you, but you are a member of the practice team. Don't be afraid to say *"I'm sorry,"* – it's not an admission of guilt. You are sorry that this has happened, and that the client is so upset. If it is something to do with you, take responsibility for sorting it out there and then.

If it involves talking to another colleague, plan a timescale for moving things forward, and stick to agreed times for contact/meetings.

Ask the client for their suggested solutions to the problem, *"What would you like us to do to make this situation better?"* Remember the agreed solutions must be realistic and achievable. Don't promise anything you can't deliver.

Write down the facts

Not only will this help the client to see that you are taking it seriously, but it allows you to empathise with the client again. Summarise what you have understood until now, and ask questions to supplement these details. Summarise from the client's perspective: *"and you felt that..."* Or *"your impression was..."* Write down any agreed follow-up actions, meetings or telephone calls. Enter them in the diary so that you don't forget.

Attend to self-care

Take some time out to reflect and prepare for your next consultation. It helps to talk it over with a colleague, have a cup of tea and "switch off" for a while. This is a stressful situation to deal with, and if it happens in the middle of a busy surgery, it can be hard to get back into neutral and ready to see the next client. It is not fair on the next client, or you, to immediately carry on with your next appointment.