



The Angry Patient

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1. **ACKNOWLEDGE**
2. **APOLOGISE**
3. **ASCERTAIN**
4. **ACTION PLAN**
5. **SAFETY & SUMMARISE**

Dealing with an angry patient can be tricky. When a patient presents angrily, emotions can quickly dominate the consultation. In these situations – calm the patient, understand the issue, and then move to problem-solving / action plan (using information the patient has told you).

The following guide can help you through these consultations

What to do in your exam

ACKNOWLEDGE (Name the emotion *first*)

Before you start making action plans and giving solutions, acknowledge the emotion. You are telling the patient *"I see you. Your reaction makes sense."*

Language examples:

- *"I can see how frustrated you are."*
- *"It sounds like this has been building up for a while."*
- *"I can hear how upset this has made you."*

If you label the emotion early, it can help prevent escalation.

APOLOGISE (You're not taking the blame)

Apologise for what your patient went through. You're not necessarily taking responsibility for an incident you were not involved in.

Safe apology phrases:

- *"I'm really sorry this has been so upsetting for you."*
- *"I'm sorry you've had this experience."*
- *"I'm sorry things haven't gone as you had expected."*

Avoid blame shifting and defensive statements when emotions are high.

An apology that sounds genuine often reduces anger more than a solution. An apology that sounds fake or not genuine can create more anger.

ASCERTAIN (Understand the issue)

Do this once the emotion has been named and acknowledged.

- What actually happened?
- What outcome do they want?

Useful open questions:

- *"Can you talk me through what's happened?"*
- *"What's been the most frustrating part for you?"*
- *"What were you hoping would happen today?"*

ACTION PLAN (Collaborative, realistic)

Now you have the story and the reason why the patient is angry. This is the time to make a plan moving forward involving the patient.

- Be transparent
- Offer choices

Language examples:

- *“Let’s see what we can do together going forward.”*
- *“There are a couple of options here — can I talk you through them?”*
- *“What would you feel is most helpful right now?”*

Make sure they are realistic and don’t overpromise and underdeliver!

SUMMARISE (To consolidate discussion)

Emotions were high at the start – now summarise when consultation is calmer

- *“So just to check I’ve understood...”*
- Re-state the patient’s concerns and the agreed plan
- Confirm next steps that you will take, and any that the patient should take

This reassures the patient **they’ve been heard** and you have remembered what they have told you previously .

“I’m really sorry you’ve been through this, I can hear how upsetting it’s been for you. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. As we’ve discussed, I’ll personally take this back to the practice manager and the partners and we’ll keep you updated.

Main Takeaway

Don’t make an action plan and give solutions until you have acknowledged the emotion and understood what the patients expects to happen next.