

## Emotional and Behavioural Changes After Brain Injury Anger and Aggressive Outbursts

### QUICK FACTS

- Anger is a very common emotional response following a brain injury
- This may be an exacerbation of the individual's pre-injury personality or a new change in personality and behaviour
- Anger is an emotion triggered by an event, and may not always lead to aggression
- Aggression or aggressive outbursts are what others can see, hear, or feel

### WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

- Irritability
- Having a very short fuse or trouble controlling temper
- Verbal aggression, which may include: swearing, yelling, judgmental, and abusive comments
- Physical aggression, which may include: hitting, pinching, kicking, pushing, or spitting
- Physical symptoms such as rapid breathing and heart rate, tense muscles, sweating, and a flushed face
- Physical self-harm
- Threatening behaviours (e.g. raising voice, standing too close, staring, shaking their fist)
- Characteristics of impulsive anger:
  - Anger begins with the injury or is much worse since injury
  - Feelings of anger come and go quite suddenly
  - Minor events trigger anger, threshold is lowered
  - Following the anger episode, the individual is surprised and embarrassed
  - Anger is made worse by physical stress such as fatigue, pain, or low blood sugar

### WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE CAUSES AND COMPLICATIONS?

#### Possible causes:

- Damage to the parts of the brain that normally control anger and behaviour
- May have had an angry and irritable personality before the brain injury and these traits could be amplified following the brain injury
- Environmental factors which may contribute to anger:
  - High level of noise, activity
  - Unexpected events, lack of structure
- Medical factors that may contribute to anger:
  - Fatigue, pain, and low blood sugar
  - Medications, alcohol, or drugs
- Personal factors that may contribute to anger:
  - Frustration, fear, anxiety, irritability, and agitation
  - Feeling isolated, depressed, or misunderstood
  - Embarrassment, shame, or guilt
  - Discovery of their difficulties, lack of insight, or unrealistic expectations
  - Difficulty concentrating, remembering, and communicating
  - Grief

#### Possible complications

- Loss of friendships and damaged relationships
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Embarrassment, frustration, and sadness following an outburst

*Disclaimer: This information is not meant to replace advice from a medical doctor. Consult a health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment.*

# FACT SHEET CONTINUED.

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### WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Keep a record of events, triggers, and levels of anger
- Use positive ways to manage and respond to behaviour, such as gently redirecting their attention to something else
- Try not to become angry yourself
- If the anger is directed toward you, remove yourself from the situation
- Do not take anger personally, recognize the impaired ability to control anger
- Avoid the escalation of anger and aggression by developing behaviour intervention and management strategies, such as suggesting they take a time out to calm down, using breathing strategies, or listening to music
- Support the development of self-control strategies (e.g. exercise or deep breathing)
- Seek support from a health care provider to learn strategies for anger management (e.g. psychotherapist, speech language pathologist, psychologist, social worker)