



# Veterinary Wisdom<sup>®</sup>

from the counselor's case files for practice teams

## Angry Clients

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You see them in your hospital lurking around the corner. Your mind screams at you to run away and hide! They pop up in your exam rooms at the worst times and you want to run for cover. They are scary, they are dreaded, and they cannot be avoided. They gobble up your time, zap your energy, and steal your humor. There are times when you'd rather express anal glands all day than deal with them and yet you have to eventually.

You probably know who I'm talking about. Yes...I am talking about angry clients. They come in all packages, shapes, sizes, and the one thing they all have in common is that they want to yell at you! They can be nasty. They accuse you of being a bad doctor, of not caring enough or of ripping them off. Sometimes they even go below the belt and attack your personal character. Why, oh why, do they do this? Well, there is a long and a short answer.

The long answer involves an extended discussion of human emotions, weakness, and how people cope with their grief, guilt, frustration, helplessness, and even embarrassment through anger. The short of it is this...people *really* don't like looking weak or vulnerable (this is especially true for many men). So instead of showing you these emotions it is much better to yell at you or anyone else who is a handy target. That means that anytime a client is feeling stressed, scared, sad, helpless, frustrated, ashamed, guilty, or weak they have the potential to go ballistic on you (and of course, most of your clients feel these things *a lot* of the time).

The good news? There's actually quite a bit: 1) not every client deals with their emotions through anger, 2) if a client does get angry, most of the time you can resolve it by letting them vent and then reaching a compromise and 3)—I've saved the best news for the last—their anger is *NOT* about you! You need not take it personally because their anger is a result of their own frustrations, not you personally (remember this one when someone really hits below the belt).

Now every expert on conflict resolution will tell you that when someone gets in your face and yells at you, the *worst* thing you can do is get defensive. Getting defensive only escalates the problem and you'll end up in a shouting match with your client. If you get defensive, you also give away your personal power to your client by letting them get to you. Think about some of the most powerful people you know. One thing they all have in common...they are relaxed. Power itself is relaxed and if you let a client rile you up, you give up your power.

So how do you avoid getting defensive with really nasty clients? How do you stay calm when you yourself are stressed, overworked, under appreciated, and standing there with a client calling you names? I've got the perfect answer... stand up straight, take a deep breath, look into your client's eyes and tell your client, "No thanks, I just had a banana." ??? I know what you're thinking. You think I just dropped one oar in the water, but I'm serious. Spout a little nonsense for just a minute or two and you will save the day.

Actually I cannot take credit for this idea. I learned about this when I worked as a school counselor at a teen-parent high school. One of my jobs was to teach troubled teens how to manage their anger and avoid physical fights. I attended a training session at a school mediation project where they taught how to de-escalate verbal attacks. One strategy they taught was de-escalating intense anger with humor or just plain old nonsense. You must admit it's pretty hard for someone to stay angry or continue yelling after you've just talked about eating bananas. Even if they do continue, you can have a heck of a lot of fun while it's happening.

You don't even have to express your nonsense verbally. Let it be your own private joke to take away the sting. The point is— you won't let their anger back up on you. This strategy, more than any other I've learned about anger management, has served me well. Fortunately, I don't have that job anymore where every day I face sullen people and recalcitrant teenagers. Unfortunately for you, there are some pet owners out there who can get very upset, difficult, and mean. I'm sure you have dealt with them. So the next time you're faced with one of them, go bananas. You'll feel much better, save your blood pressure and maybe even share a little laugh in the process.