

Communicology 101: Communication for Healthcare Professionals

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

Be Positive. Patients come to appointments with an agenda -- even if they are not consciously aware of it. Part of your job is to solicit and listen to the patient's agenda. You can do this most effectively by asking open-ended questions to discover the patient's wants, needs, opinions and beliefs. Once you have accomplished this you will want to confirm your understanding.

Invite patients to share their unexpressed feelings and demonstrate empathy and compassion when they do. Prioritize the patient's issues and counsel them appropriately.

Make It Clear. When there is a problem, name it. Write down the diagnosis for the patient. You can minimize medical terminology for the patient by translating from medical to lay terminology. Giving examples and analogies will help patients understand. Telling typical patient stories or drawing pictures or diagrams can also be useful. Use 3-D models when appropriate.

You can make sure patients don't forget or reconfigure the information you have given them by providing them with literature or photocopied illustrations. If you know of a web site that might be useful for them to look at, provide them with the URL.

Focus on what patients should and should not do in their treatment. Try providing a set of rules that are easy to follow. Have patients repeat back important information before the end of the appointment to ensure they understand.

Communicate Effectively. As a provider of medical services you want to be sure to promote patient satisfaction. Once a diagnosis is confirmed you want to enhance treatment success by allowing your patients to make informed decisions. Instill their commitment to treatment and ensure appropriate use of healthcare services.

Address Issues *Always*. Patients will most often have questions once you tell them what is wrong. Is the diagnosis correct? What is the treatment and is it necessary? What are the odds of a cure? What are potential complications? Should I get a second opinion? What happens if I decide not to undergo treatment? How long will my recovery take? Be patient. Listen to and answer all questions honestly and empathically.

Convey Bad News with Sensitivity. Suggest patients bring a relative or friend with them for their follow-up appointment. This can provide additional needed support. Convey bad news in a private comfortable place with no interruptions. State the bad news and let the ensuing silence happen.

Be an empathic medical provider and deal with anxiety, confusion and denial in an understanding way. Remain honest, but offer realistic hope. Let patients know you have been thorough and have appropriate test results with you.

Give patients reassurances of continued availability and promises they won't suffer. Provide names and numbers of support groups. Be sure to involve patient in developing treatment plans so they can proactively deal with their illness.

Deal with Complaints. Complaints are part of every practice and need to be seriously addressed. Empower your staff to handle minor problems, but be willing to become personally involved when necessary. Never be defensive and show sincere commitment for resolution.

Listen and respond to patient suggestions in a private area. Let patients tell their side of the story and empathize with their concerns. Ask them for their advice and thank them for it. Then do everything you can to resolve the situation.

The responsibilities of a medical provider are not confined to providing medical treatment. The best providers understand the significant part communication plays in establishing successful ongoing relationships with your patients.

Carol Dunitz, Ph.D. is president of The Last Word LLC, a communication and creative services company. She is a professional speaker and author of 'Louder Than Thunder,' a parable about listening and interpersonal communication. Dunitz is the playwright, lyricist and composer of 'Bernhardt on Broadway,' a musical about Sarah Bernhardt. She can be reached at 312.523.4774, cdunitz@lastword.com or www.DrCarolDunitz.com.