

Session 4

Healthcare professional –Patient/ Client Relationship

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Introduction

Life situations are not always having a smooth flow for each and every one. For everybody, it is full of health and illness experience, physical and emotional injury and pain. In order to face such situations, patients/ clients need support from others, especially, from health care team members.

Always, a relationship develops between two individuals with the purpose of supporting each other. However, the relationship between the healthcare professional and the patient is a therapeutic relationship because it is for the benefit of the patients/ clients that exist until the patients have their health-care needs fulfilled. The healthcare professional works to attain, maintain and restore health of the patient. When the patient/ client meet his/ her health care needs, he/she will be satisfied. What about the satisfaction of the healthcare professional?

4.1 Interpersonal Relationship

Arnold and Boggs (1989) identified three components required for an interpersonal relationship. Those are, (a) scientific principles necessary for

establishing and maintaining professional- interpersonal relationship; (b) specific communication skills and strategies; and (c) creative application of self in professional relationship. Combination of all of these components is necessary to understand and interact with each other effectively in a healthcare professional -patient relationship. Healthcare professional-patient relationship seems to be a usual event occurring in a health care setting. However, without careful thinking, sensitiveness, energy, and time, it may not be easy to develop a good interpersonal relationship between the healthcare professional and the patient.

During the period of maintaining the therapeutic relationship, the patient/client is not a passive recipient of care but an active participant. They also have to bring their knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, behaviours, thoughts, and feelings to build and maintain a successful relationship.

4.2 Healthcare professional - Patient Relationship

This is a reciprocal relationship between the healthcare professional and the patient, which is influenced by personal and professional characteristics of both parties. During this relationship, the healthcare professional and the patient develop themselves personally. Arnold and Boggs (1989) state that each healthcare professional enters to a relationship with a body of knowledge and a genuine desire to help others. Not only that, he/ she is very open towards the patient/ client because they consider each patient/ client is the most important person with a unique character who desires professional attention and respect.

“The world of the client is joined for the moment by the healthcare professional, bringing the healthcare professional’s knowledge of physiology, pharmacology, human behaviours, birth, death and suffering together with the client’s rich reservoir of life experiences to achieve mutually established care goals” (Arnold and Boggs, 1989, p. 132).

Benner (1984) stated that a healthcare professional needs to create a healthy climate with comfort and safety and being with the patient, encouraging to participate in care and communication, providing necessary information, touch the patient with emotional support, positive feelings towards hope, mediating, advocating, and helping him/ her to achieve goals are necessary to maintain therapeutic healthcare professional -patient relationship. Arnold and Boggs (1989) described four phases that are taking place in a healthcare professional- patient relationship. These are:

- Pre- interaction phase
- Engagement phase
- Active intervention phase
- Termination phase.

4.2.1 Pre-interaction Phase

During this phase the healthcare professional needs to explain his/ her professional goals and assess the environment and determine the priorities. Professional goals, which are different from personal goals, provide rationale to select common strategies in each phase of the relationship. By assessing the environment the healthcare professional will be able to identify the most suitable setting to interact with the patient/client. For building of an effective relationship requires a physically and psychologically comfortable environment. The environment should be a safe and comfortable setting that supports to explore feelings during interactions. Almost all these are dependent upon the communication between the healthcare professional and the patient. During this phase, one may come across with some barriers to effective healthcare professional - patient communication. Both parties enter into the relationship with some expectations. These should be on a sort of an agreement on what they expect from each other. The patient expects to get well soon with proper care and treatment and the healthcare professional expects to provide the best care to support the patient to get well and be independent as soon as possible. The healthcare professionals help the patient/client to help himself/herself.

When the patient enters the health care setting, he/she leaves him/ her familiar settings and people. The new environment is an unfamiliar one with new people and perhaps unfamiliar activities. The patient/client begins to live in this new environment full of uncertainties. He/she does not know what he/she is expected to do in this setting. This situation is further aggravated by controversial messages from other patients/ clients, and health care team members of different levels and categories. Gradually he/she may become confused due to different controversial messages. If it is continuous, he/she may feel uncertainty and may become reluctant to trust the health care team members. When he/she develops any uncertainty about him/his role as a patient, he/she may hesitate to take any health concern. Ultimately, this may be interpreted by the health care team members in a negative way. Health care team members may believe that the patient does not have any concern about one's own health. Sometimes the patient/client may discuss his/ her physical problems but may hide certain emotional concerns.

When the patient/ client are uncertain about the role of the healthcare professional, his/her feelings towards them will become different. He/she may compare healthcare professional to other health care members and may behave with traditional and stereo-typed thinking that healthcare professional are there only to carry out the doctors' prescriptions. As a result, he/she may not seek advice from healthcare professional regarding his/her health concerns.

All these problems may occur due to inadequate communication between the healthcare professional and patients. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss with the patient/ client about what he/her is supposed to do and what he/she expects from health care team members. A patient/ client have a right to know about the negative and positive aspects of his/ her health/ illness, the goals of treatment and the consequences.

Activity 1



Recall a situation when you have become emotional during interacting with a family member, friend or a patient.

1. How did you feel?
2. What were your reactions?
3. How did you communicate verbally and none verbally?
4. What were the feelings you wanted to hide?
5. Why?

4.2.2 Engagement Phase

In the first phase the healthcare professional and the patient become oriented to the overall needs and expectations from the relationship. The second phase is the engagement phase. This is the phase that begins to develop the relationship. For some, this could be easy but for others it may be a little hard at the beginning. It is important to respect the values, cultural orientation and spiritual beliefs of the patient. Creating a supportive environment for the relationship is very important to establish the therapeutic contact related to the expected health goals.

When establishing contact with the patient the healthcare professional has to tell the patients who you are, what your role will be, what you will be doing, under what conditions and circumstances you will be working. All the questions on why and what about the relationship should be included in this stage. Trust is the basic component here. When exploring the patients/client's needs and expectations the healthcare professional should apply empathy and should demonstrate an understanding of the nature of the patient's/client's problems. Arnold and Boggs (1989) identified this is similar to a bonding of mother and the baby. When there is a mutual interest based on trust, both the patient/client and the healthcare professional experience less anxiety and the bond between the two will become strong.

In a healthcare professional -patient relationship, the healthcare professional plays the key role because of his/ her expertise on the illness situation. He/she helps the patient/client and his/her family to understand and discuss process and the recovery. Therefore, the healthcare professional is responsible for facilitating the activities as the coordinator. Here, the healthcare professional should be empathic while limiting or controlling his/ her emotional responses. By this time, it is too early to apply self-disclosure. But later the healthcare professional can use self-disclosure only if it helps the patient to focus on feelings and concerns.

In order to identify the needs and expectations of the patient/ client, the healthcare professional can observe and assess the patient/ client. Then the healthcare professional may be able to develop some impressions about the patient/client and the related situations. These should be validated with the patient/ client before coming to any conclusion, because those impressions could be accurate or inaccurate interpretations. By doing this, the patient/client learns the emerging health issues and in which way his/her could expect help from the healthcare professional. Some patients do not accept the helping hand extended by the healthcare professional. It is very difficult for the healthcare professional to accept this kind of rejection because it gives uncomfortable feelings. This may be due to the fear, discomfort, insecure feelings, unfamiliar surroundings etc. The healthcare professional can show his/her respect towards the patient/client by expressing care and concern. In such a situation, you have to focus on verbal and non-verbal messages given by the patient. By responding with respect to the questions raised by the patient in relation to health issues, you will be able to build a good healthcare professional -patient relationship and rapport.

The greatest barrier to this engagement phase is the responsibility conflicts. During this relationship, the patient/client is responsible for achieving the desired level of involvement in care. If he/she is unable to cope with it, then

there will be a conflicting situation about the responsibilities. These are mainly due to beliefs and values of the patient/client and the healthcare professional. Communication assists the patient/ client and the healthcare professional to work through these conflicts on responsibilities.

Understanding the circumstances of the patient that lead to conflicting situations are very essential.

By the end of the engagement phase, there should be a well-established therapeutic relationship between the healthcare professional and the patient/client. The healthcare professional and the patient/ client should have a clear idea about the purpose, terms and the nature of the relationship. Then, it will be easy to terminate the achievement of goals. Otherwise, the relationship could turn towards a different direction. May be to develop some sort of intimate relationship, which will be difficult or painful to terminate. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the expectation of the relationship clearly.



Activity 2

Amali is a pharmacist at a rural hospital and she is the only pharmacist of that hospital. The time is 4.30 pm in the evening and she is going to close the counter after her busy work schedule. She needs to catch the only bus to reach her residence by 4.40 pm. A mother comes to take medicines for her discharged son with a long prescription although the counter is closed. Amali looks at the mother and with an irritable voice and shouts,

“Ooh! The counter is already closed now take the medicines from a nearby pharmacy”.

1. What do you think about this response?
2. What could have been the feelings of the mother?
3. What could have been a better alternative response?

4.2.3. Active Intervention Phase

This is the third phase of the relationship. This is the stage when more emotional feelings are involved. Deeper feelings of the patient/client and the genuine concerns of the healthcare professional meet together. Therefore,

both will be able to discuss conflicting issues more deeply. The sense of mutuality will be developed in this phase. To achieve this, the healthcare professional and the patient/client need to commit themselves. In order to develop mutuality, healthcare professional needs to stay with the patient/client emotionally and physically to sort out the problems and respond to those through discussions. As this is a problem-solving situation, collaboration and a sense of equal partnership should be there while keeping in mind the differences of rights, perspectives, roles, and responsibilities of the patient as well as those of the healthcare professional. This is the time when the healthcare professional have to take much responsibility in helping the patient/client. The patient/client also has to respond by taking immediate action. If the patient/client is not willing to fulfil his/her role, it is difficult to complete discussion making progress regarding necessary actions. Therefore, mutuality is essential for a good working relationship between then healthcare professional and the patient.

During identifying problems for planning a more suitable solution or implementing it the healthcare professional and the patient/client should understand each other well. If there is a part of communication that the healthcare professional is unable to understand, it is crucial to ask for clarification.

“Could you please tell me why you think so?”

The healthcare professional should expect the rising anxiety level of the patient because the patient/client realizes the actual problem during the discussion. When communicating a sad message, the patient may feel sad. Then the healthcare professional have to acknowledge the feeling while encouraging the patient. Following are some examples.

“It seems that you feel bad when we discussed about your mother”

“It is all right to cry”

“It is okay to feel angry”

Throughout the active interaction phase, the healthcare professional should show his/her a genuine interest, honest communication and concrete assistance. This helps the patient to realize the real situation of one's own health. The relationship could be threatened even with a small mistake of the healthcare professional. Communication strategies such as immediacy and congruence are useful at this stage.

The concept of immediacy means that the conversation between healthcare professional and the patient is focused on the changes required here and now. Current illness is a result of a past history. One can learn by referring to the past, which cannot change.

“What could happen if...”

By saying so, the healthcare professional refer to the future and this depends upon the current activities. Therefore, the only experience that could be changed is the present. During communication, the healthcare professional should emphasize and refocus the patient's/client's attention on current issues to make changes and achieve expected goals.

When communicating with the patient the healthcare professional should be congruent. The verbal message should be expressed equally well with facial expressions, posture and gestures tone of the voice and so many other ways by using body language. Otherwise, the verbal message will be different from the non-verbal message given through the expressions of body language alone.

The barrier to develop this phase is the power differences between the healthcare professional and the patient/ client. It is the stereotyped perception that the healthcare professional is more powerful than the patient/client. This belief of differences in power leads to an imbalance and an unequal healthcare professional -patient relationship. It is natural to think

in that manner; because of the expertise in knowledge on health related matters and the legitimate power of the health care team members. It is the healthcare professional's responsibility to communicate with the patient and made his/her to understand that he/she is equally powerful when making decisions and need not play a submissive role. To promote an effective healthcare professional- patient relationship, the power should be shared by both parties. When it is well balanced the healthcare professional -patient relationship will become very effective and nobody will play a dominant role or a submissive role. No violations of patient's /client's rights occur. Instead of being dependent on health care team member the patient/client will be able to understand the situation to make independent decisions.

Activity 3



Five year-old Uvindu is suddenly admitted to the hospital due to a hypersensitive reaction. He was in the hospital for two days and soon after the discharge he has had reactions like itching, fever and redness of the skin. His parents complained that all these reactions were due the drugs given from the hospital. They shouted at the staff of the ward and it made a real mess.

1. How would you get the attention of the parents in obtaining the history of the child?
2. How would you make the parents less anxious and less irritable?

Unshared meanings and differences in interpretation are some other barriers to develop and maintain a good relationship. When such differences exist, effective communication will not take place.

4.2.4 Termination Phase

Termination of a healthcare professional -patient relationship starts from the time the healthcare professional shares the plans and goals with the patient. From the beginning the healthcare professional should make the patient aware of the meaning of this relationship.

“I will be your healthcare professional during this shift”

“I will be your healthcare professional during your stay in this ward”

During the stay in the hospital, the lonely patient develops some sort of intimacy with the healthcare professional who is caring for him/her. If the meaning of the relationship is not communicated correctly at the beginning the patient develops a strong feeling of separation during the termination phase. If he/she is prepared for the termination phase he/she will have normal and ordinary incidence without any negative feelings. Terminating a therapeutic relationship varies from one individual to another.

The healthcare professional should allow the patient to ventilate her/ his feelings of termination. As the healthcare professional is the only close contact that the patient has had during the stay in the hospital, the feelings of intimacy could not be the same for the patient when compared to the way the healthcare professional feels. Therefore, the healthcare professional should be careful when terminating the relationship. That is why it is necessary to make the patient understand the length of the relationship since the time of first interaction occurred between the healthcare professional and the patient.

Summary

The pre-interaction phase should determine the need and the purpose of establishing a healthcare professional -patient relationship. Too close relationships lead to increase in the anxiety levels of the patient. Therefore, it is important to determine the patient's/client's expectations of the relationship and the healthcare professional should communicate the willingness to help. Otherwise, it is not possible to develop mutual goals. Maintaining open, honest, congruent communication and consistent behaviour are the key components in establishing trust. Setting limits gives a signal to power imbalances. You need to avoid rigid and cool type of behaviour. However the setting limits are important and must.

During the engagement phase, it is necessary to play a role of facilitator and accept the values and perspectives of the patient. Relationship should be professional in nature.

Interaction should be based on reality during the active interaction phase. Using active listening, congruent non-verbal communication, terms such as ‘how, when, what, where, and who’ to ask questions, not using “why”, to frequently are important aspects you need to remember during this phase. Identifying and correcting help the patient/ client to cope with maladaptive patterns of behaviours of patient, help the patient to cope with feelings. Developing coping strategies will help the patient to deal with the existing anxiety.

Plans for termination should be started from the first day/ stage of the relationship. To anticipate problems relating to termination and to make plans to resolve those are necessary. It is necessary to identify the possible behaviours of dependence, anxiety and depression. Satisfactory termination will help the patient to develop positive feelings of health.

The aim of this session is to provide necessary information to help the student to develop a good healthcare professional -patient relationship.

Objectives



More specifically the student will be able to:

- describe the building of a pre- interaction phase
- discuss the importance of establishing contact during the engagement phase
- State the need of combining feelings of the patient with the genuine concerns of the healthcare professional during the active intervention phase.

- Express the need for the termination of the therapeutic relationship without harming the patient.

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