

Effective Communication

Definition

Effective communication means conveying information to patients, and receiving information from them, in a way that is clear and respectful.

Avoiding Pitfalls

When communicating with patients with disabilities, there are several pitfalls health professionals must be aware of:

- ▶ Speaking too loudly with patients who are blind or have cognitive disabilities
- ▶ Talking to a personal care attendant or family member accompanying the patient, instead of to the patient herself
- ▶ Finishing patients' sentences for them, especially if they're speaking slowly
- ▶ Using jargon that is unfamiliar to patients
- ▶ Speaking quickly and not checking for understanding

Impact on Patient Care

Communicating effectively shows your patients that you care about what they have to say. But even more, it is a crucial way to prevent medical errors. By ensuring that you fully understand your patients, you learn the whole story. It is better to know all the details, symptoms, and concerns in order to eliminate potential confusion later.

Tips for Positive, Respectful Communication

- ▶ **Speak directly to the patient** rather than to anyone who is accompanying them. Ask the patient's permission if you need to clarify their answer with a family member.
- ▶ With patients who have difficult speech, **do not pretend to understand** them if you don't. Instead, ask them to repeat themselves until you understand. Consider using communication boards so patients can point to what they need, or ask them to write down key words.
- ▶ **Recap what the person has told you** to make sure that you both have the same understanding. "It sounds like you have more pain in your ankle in the morning--is that correct?"
- ▶ **Use simple language.** Don't overwhelm patients with abbreviations and medical jargon. Speak clearly, and allow time for your words to sink in. Then evaluate if the person is ready for you to go on.
- ▶ **Check their understanding.** When speaking to a patient, **periodically** stop and ask if they have questions about the information you have just delivered. For example, after explaining your expectations for a follow-up appointment, you might ask, "Would you please tell me in your own words what three things I'd like you to do for next time? I think it will help both of us to review the plan."

Clinical Scenario

Last year, Gene was diagnosed with a neurologic disease that makes it very difficult to use his arms and legs. He recently had a tracheostomy tube inserted to help him breathe better. The doctors explained that it would be a while before he could talk, but he is still frustrated to have no voice.

The best way Gene can communicate right now is by silently mouthing words. You are not experienced in reading lips, but you understand he's asking you to bring him something. Gene is becoming more agitated as he tries to explain what he wants. His movements get more exaggerated and it is harder to read his lips. You say, "Gene, I'm having a hard time reading your lips. This must be very frustrating for you to not be able to speak. Could I ask you some yes or no questions instead?"

Resources

Office of Disability Employment Policy: Effective Interaction

<http://1.usa.gov/XmllsU>

Job Accommodation Network

<http://www.askjan.org/media/atoz.htm>

Resource Sheet No. 4 • Effective Communication

Inclusive Health Care was developed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Boston Children's Hospital. We have decades of experience in workforce training and specialized consultation related to disability inclusion.

