

A Lifetime of Positive Communication

by Jamey Breen, a college student with cerebral palsy

I've always had good experiences with doctors, ever since I was a kid. It's all about good communication.

When I was really little, like five years old, the doctors would get down on the ground with me--get down on my level. Of course I couldn't understand complex medical ideas when I was that young. But they'd find a way to explain it to me, even if they had to use really simple language.

Now that I'm an adult, my doctors are still straightforward with me. They say exactly what's going on in plain English. If I have a question, they take the time to explain it to me. Also, if my parents are in the room, the doctors talk directly to me--not to my parents.

I know other people with disabilities have run into problems communicating with health professionals. But I've been really lucky. Maybe part of it is because I've always been so interested in my own medical care. The doctors appreciate that, so it probably makes them feel more positive about talking to me.

Throughout my life, my doctors have always believed I was capable of hearing whatever they had to say. And I really appreciate the effort they make to be clear.

Nurse's Reaction

This commentary is by a nurse who was asked to read and respond to Mr. Breen's story.

Mr. Breen's experiences highlight an essential aspect of patient care: you must "get on their level." For him, this meant everything from the body language of the health care providers to the actual language of the conversation.

As health care providers, it's natural for us to get comfortable with medical jargon and maintain a fast pace throughout the shift. However, we must make a conscious effort to serve the patient's needs. This could range from getting on the floor with a child, to sitting down with a patient at an appointment, to using simple language, to recognizing the level of acceptance a patient has for a diagnosis or procedure.

There are two ways to get "on level" with your patients: physically and cognitively.

Physically, getting on the patient's level transmits the feeling that you are equal to the patient and that you are dedicated to spending time with them. When you remain standing, walking, or above the patient, it makes them feel that you are still on the go and "looking down" on them.

Pulling up a chair is a simple way to help the patient feel respected and equal. This is an excellent technique to use when you're talking to someone who is sitting in a wheelchair.

Cognitively, getting on the patient's level might take some deeper understanding. We need to read our patients' cues (body language, eye contact, and verbal responses). These cues can help us to assess patient understanding, acceptance of a topic, and readiness for conversation.

Based on our assessment, we must adjust our approach to suit the patient's state of mind at that time. This includes:

- ▶ adjusting language and terminology
- ▶ determining appropriate conversation depth about curative versus palliative care
- ▶ addressing the patient directly, as opposed to others in the room who may have fewer communication "barriers"

When we practice these actions on a regular basis, they will become habit.

Patients appreciate thoughtful and respectful communication. This will also contribute to a successful hospital visit. The patient will understand the information you are trying to relay. They will feel respected and included in their health care plan. Finally, the patient will be more likely to comply with the plan and to make follow-up visits due to the positive experience.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ What do you do to get "on level" with your patients?
- ▶ What are other ways you could adjust your cognitive approach to be "on level" with a patient?
- ▶ How can you guide others around you to communicate with patients in this way?

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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.

