

COMMUNICATION TIPS

PATIENT COMMUNICATION

Medical interviewing is one of the provider's most important activities. Significant satisfaction can be gained by both the patient and provider when the encounter goes well. Since it is likely that medical training was not sufficient in this area, the mentor and mentee can discuss the best ways to efficiently conduct the medical interview.

- Kaiser Permanente's published Four Habits Model contains "best practices" for communication with patients at a clinic visit. The four habits are:
 - 1) Invest in the beginning
 - Ask your mentee how he/she introduces himself and establishes rapport.
 - Does the mentee acknowledge other family members present?
 - Does the mentee ask the patient's primary concerns at the beginning?
 - 2) Elicit the patient's perspective
 - Does the mentee ask the patient what he/she thinks is causing the problem?
 - Does the mentee ask about the impact of the issue(s) on the patient's life?
 - 3) Demonstrate empathy
 - What is an empathetic statement that the mentee could use?
 - What are some nonverbal ways of showing empathy?
 - 4) Invest in the end
 - Does the mentee involve the patient in decision-making?
 - Can the patient repeat back what he/she understands about the plan?
- Other best practices for communication include:
 - 1) Encourage the patient to use the patient portal system if available.
 - 2) Use telemedicine or other IT applications when appropriate.
- Ask the mentee to practice the suggestions above and report back at the next session.

TEAM COMMUNICATION

In the medical environment, we are involved in multiple versions of teams, from the medical office to the entire medical organization. Team communication enhances provider satisfaction and patient safety, as well as equips and empowers the other members of the health care team.

- Ask your mentee if he/she is on good terms with all those who participate in patient flow or whether he/she has any conflicts (this reflects self-awareness).
- Ask your mentee whether the staff is stable or is in constant flux.
- Mentees should identify members of the team and respect their functions; does the mentee greet team members at the start of the day?
- If it does not yet exist, establish a morning "huddle" with your immediate staff to discuss workflow for the day, or monthly meetings at which participation is mandatory, this fosters a sense of connection among members of the team; meeting content should be elicited from team members and be documented.

- Mentors can encourage mentees to meet formally and regularly with colleagues, either during the workday or after hours at a dinner, tea or drinks to share best practices and build community. This is also a good forum to discuss other issues facing the clinic.
- If you have not been assigned to a mentor in your department, make friends with an experienced colleague with whom you can bounce off your concerns before escalating your ideas to a higher level. In addition to learning more about how the organization runs, sharing ideas with colleagues is critical to your satisfaction.

SYSTEMS COMMUNICATION

Systems issues contribute to provider burnout. When providers learn ways to cope with the demands of the workplace, they are still left with issues that lay with the structure of the organization and not with their own habits, personalities, or competency. Here are some tips to help mentees address systems issues.

- Show your commitment to the health care organization (i.e., that you plan to stay):
 - Place posters/paintings/plants/family photos in your office
 - Decorate your exam rooms (if allowed)
 - Socialize with colleagues during lunchtime (eat or take a walk) or after hours
 - Organize a picnic or dinner or holiday lunch for staff
 - Celebrate birthdays
- It helps to be a provider that demonstrates good patient relationships when considering approaching peers and higher ups with suggestions for improvements.
- It may also be a good idea for the medical director/CEO to have regular meetings with the frontline workers.
- Try not to bring problems to a higher level without discussing these issues with the local staff involved, if this applies; value transparency and honesty.
- Don't be afraid to approach your supervisor or director, if he/she is the only person who can directly help with your issue; you are a valuable part of the team, and it behooves the organization not to lose you.
- If your organization has no mechanism for addressing your concern, become an activist and see how you can solve this issue for your satisfaction and the benefit of your patients.
 - For example, if some patients cannot afford the \$5 copay for a medication or a bus ride to the clinic, establish a fund that can be used for this patient. Work with a social worker or other "patient navigator" to this end.
 - Or if there is a systems issue that is overwhelming all of your colleagues, organize colleagues to address this issue with an administrator, with the blessing of the medical director
- Be ready with a solution to any problem you raise. Be positive and express your belief that the problem can be solved with enough energy brought to what's best for the providers and the patients.
- Present data to support the assessed needs whenever applicable.
- Consider being in a leadership position in order to be an agent of change, realizing that the job does not guarantee that improvements will happen quickly.

COMMUNICATION IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Providers face challenging conversations in any of the above interactions. Thankfully these situations are a minority of our providers' interactions, but they bring a great amount of anxiety and emotional stress to their day. Some common topics that providers share are:

- *Non-adherence to prescribed medications or recommended lifestyle modification*
- *Disparity regarding real or perceived differences in goals (whether provider to patient or team member to team member)*
- *Distrust of health-care providers and/or Western medicine in general*
- *Cultural, ethnic, religious, or language differences*
- *Cognitive impairment*
- *Drug-seeking behavior*

Subsequently, these challenging situations can develop into conflicts that:

- *Are highly stressful for both parties*
- *May seriously undermine the provider-patient relationship*
- *Often lead to patient dissatisfaction and even lawsuits*

Most of us have little or no training in addressing these important issues. However, its importance is now being recognized in medical training - developing effective *Interpersonal and Communication Skills* is a key "Core Competency" area for residency training.

Mentoring:

A good place to begin:

1. Ask your mentee to describe examples of challenging encounters based on one or more of the issues listed above.
2. Share some ideas about enhancing their skills in this area, focusing on:
 - *Establishing trust and rapport with their patient*
 - *Expressing empathy with the patient's concerns and feelings*
 - *Using effective nonverbal communication techniques, including brief pauses*
 - *Collaborating on mutual goals and priorities with the patient*
 - *Get curious not furious when there is a difference of opinion*
 - *Acknowledging the challenges/difficulties associated with change*
 - *Affirming autonomy and small successes*
 - *Reflective Listening*
 - *Working on Confidence Building*
 - *Reflecting on how you managed difficult patients over your years of practice*
3. Have your mentee identify a few techniques to practice with their patients before your next meeting.
4. Suggest that your mentee view the following video or read the following articles before your next meeting:
 - [Video: Intro to Motivational Interviewing.](#)
 - ["The Four Habits Model" and Huff Post article on The Four Habit Model](#)

References:

- [Getting the Most out of the Clinical Encounter: The Four Habits Model](#)



- 4 Best Practices for Improving Patient-Provider Communication