

# Exhibiting Empathy and Sensitivity in Provider-Patient Communication



It can be argued that the provider-patient relationship is the center of medicine. The clinical encounter that takes place in the provider's office is the core activity of healthcare.<sup>1</sup> These moments are when important information is conveyed about the patient's condition, health status, and treatment.

A key component of ensuring that the communication that takes place in the provider's office is as effective as possible is empathy. By expressing empathy, the provider is able to gather important information about what the patient is experiencing, and, in turn, the patient is respected throughout the process.<sup>2</sup> As a result, empathy has been shown to improve patient satisfaction as well as compliance with the patient's prescribed treatment regimen.<sup>3</sup>

## Tips for improving empathy

Key steps that you can take to ensure effective empathetic communication with your patients include the following<sup>2,4</sup>:

- Recognize how the patient may be feeling in the clinical setting (eg, afraid, angry)
- Pause to imagine how the patient might be feeling
- State your perception of the patient's feeling
- Legitimize the patient's feeling
- Respect the patient's effort to cope with the situation
- Offer support and partnership



Taking simple measures to ensure effective patient communication can help facilitate the clinical interview and increase the efficiency of gathering patient information.<sup>2</sup>

## Expressing Empathy to Special Patient Populations

Achieving effective communication is not a simple task. Often, there may be some combination of physical, sensory, or cognitive changes that complicate the process. This is especially true of certain patient populations, such as older adults.<sup>5</sup> Effective communication with older adults is important for 3 reasons<sup>5</sup>:

1. Providers assess older adults through communication with them; the more efficient that communication is, the more likely older adults will be to understand and comply with the information they are given.
2. Effective communication can help you understand the social, emotional, and financial impact of chronic conditions on older adults; in turn, you can find ways to provide support to help them cope.
3. Communication allows for a therapeutic partnership with older adults and their families, enabling them to carry out empowerment strategies.

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## Checklist for effective communication

Many of these practices can be applied to patients with disabilities<sup>5</sup>:

- Adapt to the visual and/or auditory needs of older and disabled patients
- Provide or encourage the use of assistive devices (eg, handheld magnifiers, voice-recording electronics)
- Provide oral and written communication that is well-constructed and uses plain language
- Reinforce key words and summarize topics
- Monitor your nonverbal communication so that the patient does not perceive you as being frustrated or annoyed
- Offer extra time and repeat or rephrase your directions
- Keep an “adult-focused” attitude during interactions and be sure to avoid a condescending, slow, or exaggerated tone
- Encourage patients and caregivers to ask questions and offer comments

Often, older adults or patients with disabilities may have vision or hearing difficulties that can make communication challenging. It is important to recognize these challenges so as not to come across as dismissive or uncaring. These simple tips can help you communicate more effectively with your patients who have reduced vision or hearing<sup>5</sup>:

- Provide patients with printed information that is written in common vocabulary, is clutter-free, has sharp color contrast between text and background, and uses a large font size (at least 16 points) with adequate spacing between lines
- Speak clearly, with natural volume, intonation, and gestures
- Use well-constructed but concise sentences and avoid the use of unclear pronouns
- Pause to facilitate comprehension and allow the patient to ask questions
- Check occasionally for understanding and be prepared to repeat or rephrase your statements

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## Additional resources

The following offer additional information and resources related to achieving empathetic communication with patients.

### American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)

The ASHA is the professional, scientific, and credentialing association for speech-language specialists and is committed to ensuring that all people with speech, language, and hearing disorders receive services to help them communicate.

[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

### Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities, guaranteeing equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.

[www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)

### Lighthouse International

A worldwide organization dedicated to overcoming vision impairment through rehabilitation, education, research, and advocacy.

[www.lighthouse.org](http://www.lighthouse.org)

### Mental Health: a Report of the Surgeon General

The first Surgeon General's Report on this important health topic, this report asserts that mental illness is a critical public health problem that must be addressed by the United States.

[www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/home.html](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/home.html)

## References

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4. Platt FW. Empathy: can it be taught [letter to the editors]? *Ann Intern Med*. 1992;117(8):700.
5. Lubinski R. Communicating effectively with elders and their families. *The ASHA Leader*. March 16, 2010:1-8.