

Empathetic Listening and Effective Communication: A Guide for Pharmacists Tip Sheet

Identifying ways to improve communication at the pharmacy

Conveying an empathetic tone is particularly important when communicating with oncology patients. Showing empathy can improve adherence, patient satisfaction, and treatment outcomes.¹

Conveying empathy and engaging in active listening at the pharmacy can result in more successful:

- Patient and caregiver education
- Communication about all aspects of the treatment regimen
- Identification of financial barriers

Tips for successful patient communication

It is important to consider how an oncology patient may be feeling, and how they may react to different communication approaches. It is essential to consider the patient and caregiver goals, and where the patient is on the cancer care continuum – from diagnosis to end-of-life care.

Following the simple steps below may improve your ability to communicate empathetically.

Open-ended communication

Phrasing questions in an open-ended way may reduce patients' feelings of blame and may prevent the patient from becoming defensive. For example, if a patient is not adhering to their medication, consider using an open-ended question to understand what is preventing them from being adherent.²

Active listening shows the patient that you are attuned to their needs and a partner in achieving their cancer care goals. Active listening can be achieved by doing two easy things:

1. Being mindful of your non-verbal cues and maintaining eye contact
2. Maintaining focus on the patient dialogue, even though you may feel that you already know your response to the patient's question

The COMFORT Model³

The COMFORT Model is one example of a resource that can help you more effectively communicate with patients. The COMFORT Model consists of seven components:

1. Communication –

Understanding the patient's clinical narrative and recognizing tasks and relationship practices; for example, if a spouse or child is helping with oral medication administration by setting up weekly pill boxes or supplying pills with meals, there may be a different family dynamic among spouses compared to children and parents

- Ask questions like, *“How has your illness affected your life and wellness?”* or *“How has your support system helped you throughout your cancer treatment?”*

2. Orientation –

Gauging the patient's health literacy and considering cultural factors to communicate effectively

- Use plain language to avoid health literacy barriers between you and the patient and family and/or caregiver

3. Mindful Communication –

Engaging in active listening, being aware of non-verbal cues, and being aware of patient's self-care needs

- Consider each patient's unique circumstances and avoid boilerplate communication and judgment of the patient/caregiver

4. Family –

Observing family and caregiver communication patterns and responding to varying needs of family and/or caregiver

- Determine who helps with the care of the patient and ensure communication aligns with the needs of the patient and family and/or caregiver

5. Openings –

Identifying pivotal points in patient care and finding common ground with patient's family and/or caregiver to ensure communication openly flowing when it matters the most

- Initiation of a new treatment is one example of a pivotal point in patient care when ensuring that patients and family and/or caregiver can communicate openly

6. Relating –

Understanding the multiple goals of the patient and family and/or caregiver and linking care to the patient's quality of life

- Reiterate treatment information multiple times in different ways to ensure understanding
- Communicate how the treatment information is linked to the goals discussed

7. Teams –

Developing a collaborative team structure within the pharmacy for those involved in the patient's care³

- Develop a working team-based structure for when the pharmacist or prescriber should be consulted on next steps, given the more common situations encountered at the pharmacy

Additional resources:

Factors in Client–Clinician Interaction: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4040827/#!po=25.0000>

The Importance of Physician-Patient Relationships Communication and Trust in Health Care:

<https://dukepersonalizedhealth.org/2019/03/the-importance-of-physician-patient-relationships-communication-and-trust-in-health-care/>

How to Demonstrate Empathy and Compassion in a Pharmacy Setting:

<https://pharmaceutical-journal.com/article/ld/how-to-demonstrate-empathy-and-compassion-in-a-pharmacy-setting>

References

1. Ratka A. Empathy and the development of affective skills. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2018;82(10):7192.
2. Berg S. A game plan for medication adherence starts with building trust. American Medical Association. <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/patient-support-advocacy/game-plan-medication-adherence-starts-building-trust>. Accessed March 5, 2020.
3. Wittenberg E, Reb A, Kanter E. Communicating with patients and families around difficult topics in cancer care using the COMFORT communication curriculum. *Semin Oncol Nurs.* 2018;34(3):264-273.

