

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS II

WHAT MAKES YOUR PATIENTS TICK?

How humans interact and how they receive and process information is complex, which in turn impacts on how successful communication will be. Given these complexities, how do you ensure that your advice is fully understood by your patients and that their needs are met?

Leading psychologists have provided some useful insights into identifying different personality traits and learning styles. Here, in this second article discussing different communication approaches, we explain some techniques to help you understand what makes your patients tick and how adapting your approach can help you get your message across.

People learn, take in and handle information in different ways; therefore when providing education and advice, it is important to assess the preferred learning styles of each patient. One method commonly used to assess people's approach to learning is the Visual-Auditory-Kinaesthetic (VAK) model, sometimes known as 'VHF' (Visual-Hear-Feel).

Different learning styles

Communication is more than just words. The majority of people prefer to learn **visually**. They need to see something before they understand it and remember it. This means that, in conversation, you are most likely to hear your patient say "I see what you mean". When communicating with or educating patients with a visual learning style, bear in mind that they are more receptive to pictures, diagrams, demonstrations, displays, handouts, films and flip charts.

Some people have an **auditory** learning style. They may hear sounds in their head when recalling something. If your patient says "I hear what you're saying" this may



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mean that they are most likely to learn by verbal explanation and will rely on listening to your words in preference to anything you might show them.

Finally, much fewer people have a strong **kinaesthetic** preference. Their learning involves physical experience – touching, feeling, holding and doing. Your patients may say "I know how you feel" in which case they are likely to learn by having a go for themselves, for example, they would benefit from actually practising a brushing technique themselves.

Although some aspects of learning styles may represent strong inherent preferences, all patients can benefit from multi-sensory approaches to learning.

Different behavioural styles

While it is impossible to pigeonhole each patient, it is possible to identify certain behavioural traits that will help you adapt your communication approach when explaining a treatment plan or providing home care advice.

Behavioural psychologists have identified four basic personality styles: analytical,



Different behavioural styles

Analyticals are formal, organised, efficient and detail-oriented. They are not highly emotive and tend to ask a lot of questions and take a long time to make decisions. The best way to communicate with these patients is via facts and information presented in a logical manner.

Drivers are result-oriented, assertive and independent. They have clear objectives and tell you exactly what they think and are most likely to respond if you show that you are listening attentively and if you provide evidence and solutions that demonstrate your understanding of their goals.

Amiables are sociable people who appear warm, cooperative and genuine. They are emotive, rarely confrontational and tend to ask a lot of questions. Taking time to establish trusting personal relationships will help put them at ease.

Expressives are emotional people. They are familiar with others and quick to respond. A good communication approach for this patient type is taking the time to form personal bonds and expressing your own feelings when relating to them.

driver, amiable and expressive. The differences between these types of behavioural styles are profound and each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Although people do not tend to fit neatly into one type, your patient's dominant style will influence the way they act, react and interact. Without realising it you are already likely to adapt your communication style based on the feedback you receive. However, by becoming more familiar with the different personality styles, you can learn to recognise them in your patients more easily, which can help you understand how best to relate to them, educate and offer advice.

Adapting your approach

Why is an understanding of your patients' learning and behavioural styles important? Taking into account the different VAK learning styles will help you to better unravel your patients' communication needs and by adapting your own methods to best fit each patient's behavioural style, you can ensure that your advice is truly understood.

Clearly, **'amiable'** personality types will respond to the more personable, friendly and less formal style and they will more



readily agree. In contrast, **'analyticals'** may prefer you to present logic, facts and figures to back up your advice and will need extra time to consider and reflect before taking a course of action. A tendency to ask questions is common to both types.

'Drivers' tend to respond well if goals are agreed and they have a clear idea of the treatment outcome, while **'expressives'** need to feel a strong empathy and 'buy into' the person providing the treatment. People with these personality types are more likely to tell you what they think than ask your opinion.

By putting these techniques into practice, it is possible to adapt your own style of communication to your patient, which will put them more at ease and therefore more likely to hear your messages.

Further information

For further information about some of the barriers that may exist between dental practitioners and their patients, refer to *'Why does communication sometimes fail?'*. Find out how to avoid confusion when talking to patients and learn about some of the different communication strategies and tactics that ease the process by visiting *'Top tips for successful communication'*. Two further articles giving an overview of patient motivation and two slide decks on patient motivation and communication are also provided within the Patient focus section.

