

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS III

TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

Some people are natural communicators and for them it is an intuitive process where they seem to get their message across effectively, connect with others easily and inspire action. But for many, successful communication is not so straightforward and communication skills need to be studied and acquired.

Much has been written about how people communicate and how skills can be improved. In this third article on how to get your message across we discuss some different strategies and tactics that can be successfully used when talking to patients to ease the communication process.

Communication is complex and many barriers can get in the way (see 'Why does communication sometimes fail?'). However, good communication is a rewarding process and the result of an effective exchange is that each person feels he/she has their current need met well enough, in a way that feels good to them (e.g. with respect and honesty, or direct and no nonsense).

Communication strategies

A number of factors influence communication and as a consequence a variety of different skills come into play. When dispensing advice to your patients on the best home care practices, the first step in getting your message across is to try to minimise any potential for confusion. There are several practical things that can be done on a routine basis that can help avoid any misunderstanding or confusion (see the box on the right).

There are also several strategies that can help improve communication. For example, people are often more open to your message when they feel that you are focused on them and you are taking their views into account. Body language



and asking questions is important here. Listening, rather than just talking, is a vital part of communication and a useful skill to adopt. Similarly, during a communication exchange people often need to feel a sense of empathy – that you not only hear what they are saying but that you truly understand them. Providing support and encouragement once you have delivered your message are also key.

How to avoid confusion

These tips may be helpful:

- remove your mask
- use layman's terms to explain why you are recommending a course of action
- deliver your advice succinctly and clearly at a time when patients are receptive e.g. after treatment instead of during it
- repeat what your patient tells you to ensure you understand what they are trying to say
- ask your patient to re-state your advice to ensure they understood clearly
- discuss the patient's ability and willingness to adhere to your advice.



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Making body language work for you

Controlling your body language is not straightforward, so to help try to remember the acronym **SOLER** (Egan, 1990).

- Face them **S**quarely: try to keep your shoulders parallel to your patient as turning your body away can lessen the degree of contact and may show disinterest.
- Adopt an **O**pen posture: for example standing with your arms folded across your chest may look defensive and implies that you want to be left alone (although when you are seated crossed arms can suggest empathy).
- **L**ean towards them: a slight inclination of the upper body toward your patient 'tells' them: I'm interested in what you have to say.
- Maintain good **E**ye contact: this suggests honesty and sincerity although intense eye contact can put your patient off. In practice, this may mean avoiding the temptation to write your notes at the same time as talking/listening to your patient.
- Be **R**elaxed: a relaxed, calm approach will help the patient feel comfortable while nervous fidgeting or distracting facial expressions will not put them at ease.

Taking account of the different ways in which people learn and acquire information is also important (refer to the article '*What makes your patient tick?*' for more information on this).

One model that is frequently used in counselling summarises the process described here as: Attend, Ask, Listen, Empathise and Reassure.

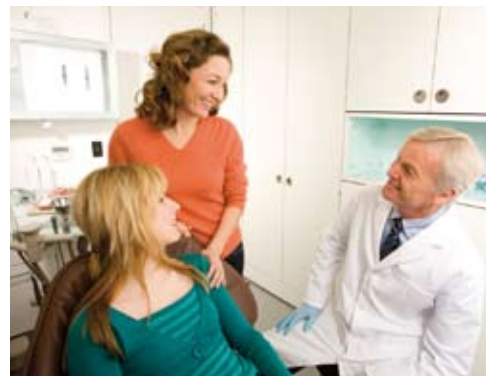
Attend...

Attending refers to the ways in which you can create an environment of attention and interest. When using this skill effectively it prepares you for listening attentively and it conveys to your patients that you are 'with' them and interested. Humans instinctively use body language when communicating and these, often subtle, non-verbal movements play a critical role when attending to your patient and increasing their level of comfort.

Ask...

Do you understand what your patient wants or have you made assumptions? Asking and inviting questions is an essential step to help unravel what your patient really wants or needs – especially as they may not know themselves! Allow your patient plenty of time to speak. The more you listen, the more you will learn about them. If you are listening actively, you will have picked up any uncertainty, nervousness or reluctance and can explore and address any concerns.

Sales coach Ashley Latter (Latter, 2005) believes the biggest mistake dentists make is not spending enough quality time building relationships with their patients and finding out what they want. By asking



the right questions, you can find out what is important to your patient and what his or her treatment goals are. For example:

Are they happy with the appearance of their teeth?

How do they rate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10?

What improvements would they like to see?

How important is it?

Appointment times are short but by setting aside enough time to talk to your patient by asking questions and listening attentively to their agenda, you can influence their treatment decisions and improve acceptance of, and patient ownership of, treatment plans.

Listen...

When listening to your patients, develop the ability to capture their messages whether verbal or non-verbal, clear or vague. Start by being fully present psychologically, socially and emotionally (attending) so you can observe and read the patient's non-verbal behaviour (posture, facial expression, movement, voice quality), tone of voice, pitch and where they use pauses etc. Listen to and

How to deliver information

These tips may be helpful:

- slow down – progress can be quicker if you create the opportunity for reflection
- consider the amount of information given – patients vary widely in their desire for information
- consider the priorities of the patient – he/she will have to integrate the information into their everyday lives
- include positive messages – truthful positive messages can help to increase a patient's receptiveness to hard facts
- deliver information with care – in an accessible way and appropriate to the patient's level of education
- consider preparing handouts to give to patients to take home which may appeal to visual learners.

How you get your message across may also need to be tailored to address social, cultural and environmental barriers to successful health education outcomes.



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By repeating back to the patient your understanding of their messages and needs, you will help them to feel heard and understood.

understand their verbal messages and put it in the context of the social setting of their life.

Empathise...

Empathy means not just listening to someone but understanding them and their concerns as far as possible and communicating this understanding to them. It is impossible to fully know another's subjective experience but it is possible to attempt it. By repeating back to the patient your understanding of their messages and needs, you will help them to feel heard and understood; this feedback process also gives the opportunity for the patient to correct any misunderstanding on your part.

Reassure...

Your patient may feel nervous or unsure and is likely to need support and encouragement. Summarising your message, reassuring your patient about any treatment concerns and inviting them to call if they have any queries or worries will help to make them feel supported.

The strategies and tactics explained here are just some of the different methods that you can integrate into your communication approach in order to get your message across as effectively as possible. By truly understanding and correctly interpreting your instructions and reasons behind them, your patients are more likely to heed your advice and maintain, or even improve, their oral health.

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 about different personality traits and learning styles and how adapting your approach can help you get your message across by visiting 'What makes your patient tick?'. 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.

References

Egan G. (1990). The Skilled Helper, 4th Ed. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole. 467 Family Therapy, 436.02 Practicum. Latter A. Ask the right questions. 2005. Private Dentistry.