

Are You



Listening?

By Karen M.
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Improving Our Image by Sharpening Our Communication Skills

Mr. Peterson suffered a stroke and was left with expressive aphasia and motor function loss. Peggy was his assigned nurse and he began to develop a trusting relationship with her. While expressing his feelings about the stroke he said, “You know, I used to be the number one car salesman at Liberty Car Sales.” Peggy quickly replied, “Oh, you’ll soon be back to your old self, you’ll see. Many people have strokes and go on to have normal lives.” Mr. Peterson abruptly stopped talking and never mentioned his feelings again to any of the nursing staff or his family.

Peggy did not listen to her patient when he tried to talk about his stroke and how it changed his life. She was anxious to say the right thing, but chose a response that quickly ended the conversation. It made Mr. Peterson feel that his problem was trivial and happened to a lot of people. In addition, Peggy was not tuned in to the fact that her patient needed to tell his story. Peggy did not need to respond at all—she simply needed to listen.

Communicating with Patients

Active listening is a primary source of communication for nurses. What patients say about themselves is very important. In order to listen, the nurse must be actively engaged in receiving and decoding messages that patients send. The nurse listens to the patient with two purposes in mind: to comprehend the message and evaluate its meaning.

Nurses who employ active listening are able to paraphrase the message in different ways throughout the conversation. Never assume that you have understood another person's thoughts. Instead, make sure you have received the entire message accurately, especially in very intense conversations. When a topic is emotionally charged or has implications for important decisions that must be made, it is extremely important to confirm that the receiver understands the message. How can this be done without repeating the message word for word? It is achieved by having the receiver paraphrase the content of the message. Clarifying the content is a vital part of active listening. It also demonstrates to the patient that you were truly listening and the message was received.

The nurse should observe the patient closely during the interaction. In addition to listening to the content of the message, the nurse should observe body language, eye contact, and nonverbal behavior and should integrate this information in assessing the patient's current emotional state.

In addition to empathy and trust, the nurse must use other tools in this one-to-one relationship: "I statements" can be used to help patients identify their feelings. For example, when a patient describes his or her feelings, the nurse can further the interaction by saying, "I hear you saying...." Situations in which the nurse is having difficulty understanding the patient's message can be handled by saying, "I do not understand you." This helps clarify that the message has not been received.

Reflection can be used to obtain an emotional response from patient.



Like "I statements," reflection can help patients explore their feelings. The nurse can guide the reflective process by focusing on feelings rather than information. By saying "you seem anxious," the nurse identifies the feeling that needs to be explored.

Expressing feelings by verbalizing them is important for patients, regardless of the setting. In order to understand a patient's feelings, nurses must be in touch with their own feelings. The nurse must be able to observe and decode a patient's behavior. It is important that the nurse elicit the feelings that are congruent with the patient's behavior.

Verbal reassurance is another communication skill that nurses use quite often, but it should not always be the first skill to use since it can and often does lessen the situation. Verbal reassurance can give the patient a feeling of self-worth and a sense of hope.

Let's listen in on a conversation between Mrs. Connors, an 87-year-old patient, who is being transferred today to a nursing home. Joe, her nurse, initiates a conversation with her to orient her to the nursing home. She tells Joe, "I feel useless and old. Nobody comes to visit me anymore and nobody cares what happens to me."

Joe replies, "I care about you, Mrs. Connors." The patient begins to smile as she reaches out and takes Joe's hand. Mrs. Connors begins to relax and asks Joe to tell her more about the nursing home.

Joe could have also reassured Mrs. Connors nonverbally through the use of body language, tone of voice, or touch. Some of the most common examples of reassuring body language include smiling, leaning forward, a facial expression of concern, sitting with arms open and legs uncrossed, and good eye contact. All of these behaviors tell the patient that the nurse is open to communicating.

Communicating with Others

How nursing is perceived by the public is the responsibility of every nurse in the profession. We must carefully enhance our self-esteem, examine our attitudes, improve our presentation, sharpen our communication skills, serve as mentors to new nurses, become active in our nursing associations and in local community projects and make learning a life-long commitment. You should always remember to introduce yourself as a nurse.

In order to stay on the leading edge of a very exciting and constantly evolving profession, each nurse must make a decision regarding his or her practice. Nurses should examine how they feel about themselves and their jobs, and remind themselves of their importance. When nurses feel good about who they are and what they do, they appear and become self-assured, which can have a powerful impact on all facets of their personal and professional lives. Improved self-esteem reflects a positive self-concept, which in turn will enhance our image.

Nursing must consider itself to be a community. There is power in numbers, and we should become active members of our local and national organizations. Working with other nurses on issues that affect us not only strengthens our nursing voice, but promotes a sense of pride and fulfillment that lets others know that we are committed to our profession. It is important for nurses to be visible to the public. If you volunteer for a community organization, be sure to speak up and proudly announce, "I am a nurse." ©

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