



For you, your career, and your life

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When you encounter challenges during your residency, you don't have to face them alone. When you need someone to listen, extra support or a fresh perspective for a difficult situation, your Resident Assistance Program can help. Our professionals offer counseling, coaching and referrals to resources that can help you excel as a physician. Call us at 813-870-3344.

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“Listen, Doc, let me tell you...” Why good listening skills are essential

Listening for the first few minutes of a patient interaction will help set the tone, establish trust and reveal important information earlier in the visit. A doctor who is a good listener is also less likely to run into malpractice problems. Experts discuss the value of listening skills and how they can be used to improve even the briefest patient encounter.



“Listening is noting what, when and how something is being said. Listening is distinguishing what is not being said from what is silence. Listening is not acting like you’re in a hurry, even if you are. Listening is eye contact, a hand placed gently upon an arm. Sometimes, listening is taking careful notes in the person’s own words. Listening, like labor assisting, creates a safe space where whatever needs to happen or be said can come.”

— Allison Para Bastien

“If a doctor is really listening, he or she will pick up clues to a patient’s concerns very quickly,” notes Balu H. Athreya, M.D., Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics who now teaches at the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware. “Doctors have to deal with a number of barriers to good listening. One of them is time pressure. If you have to see a patient every 15 to 20 minutes, you are always in a hurry. That climate is not conducive to good listening.”

Understanding some communication basics may help physicians understand how they come across to patients, and how to get past barriers to effective listening they may not even be aware of.

“Only 7 percent of communication is in the words or content,” says executive coach and communications consultant Joan Bolmer. “Thus the patient will not feel fully heard if the doctor starts making statements too soon.”

“Fifty-five percent of

communication is visual — expressed through our body language,” says Bolmer. “If the doctor is in a rush, it can be seen by the way he or she walks, sits and has eye contact. The message sent by a rushed doctor is that there are more important people and problems in other rooms. The patient may even think that they and their problem are not really important or that they are a bother to the doctor.”

Thirty-eight percent of communication is auditory — voice tone, volume and speed, Bolmer continues. “Speaking rapidly conveys rush. When that is combined with medical jargon, the patient can feel bewildered, intimidated or stupid. But with moderately paced speech and moderate volume, a doctor can express patience.”

So how can a physician demonstrate good listening skills within typical time constraints?

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Money Matters

Anxious About Investing?

A recent survey commissioned by the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) shows American investors have significant anxiety about the security of their investments, particularly as it relates to their retirement savings.

More investors report that they are anxious about losing money on their investments (78%) and saving for retirement (73 %) than are anxious about losing their job (50%), buying a house (42%) or paying for college (35%). Only serious health problems were ranked above investment concerns in the survey.

As part of its mission, FINRA works to protect investors through education. It offers these anxiety-reducing steps for investors:

Verify background of brokers

BrokerCheck, available at www.finra.org/brokercheck, features professional background information on current and former registered brokers and FINRA-regulated brokerage firms.

Get 401(k) tips online

The Smart 401(k) Investing section of the FINRA Web site at www.finra.org/InvestorInformation/SmartInvesting can guide you through the process of enrolling and managing a 401(k) account.

Seek reliable investor info

Obtain investor information from reliable sources, including FINRA (www.finra.org), The Securities and Exchange Commission (www.sec.gov) and the North American Securities Administrators Association (www.nasaa.org).

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Listening Skills, *continued*

“The greatest barrier to listening is having your mind on other matters,” says Bolmer. “When walking into the room with a patient, choose to be totally present with that person and let go of all other concerns. Don’t try to fix anything until you have heard the person’s whole story.”

“The words ‘tell me more...’ are a powerful way of communicating to a patient that you are truly interested in what they have to say,” says Athreya. “Then, as you listen, maintain a non-judgmental attitude.”

Medical malpractice experts know all too well what problems can develop when doctors fail to use good communication skills. “In the vast majority of lawsuits and claims we see, there is a communication issue interwoven in the testimony or the evidence presented,” says Robin Diamond, MSN, JD, RN, Vice President of Patient Safety for The Doctors Company. “Listening well is among the top loss prevention measures physicians can use.”

As Diamond works to help physicians minimize their risk of being involved in lawsuits, she emphasizes that communication techniques are a critically important learned skill.

“It’s very difficult for many people — not just physicians — to be quiet and attentive when we are pressed for time. Yet even when a doctor’s time is extremely limited, a few techniques can go a long way toward demonstrating to the patient that they care and that they are listening. Doctors come to us because they want to learn how to avoid being sued. They don’t always like to hear that there are some basic ‘soft science’ skills that go along with preventing lawsuits.”

“We recommend that doctors sit at the same eye level as their patients, instead of hovering over them while they talk,” says Diamond. “We encourage the use of good eye contact, facilitating remarks, like ‘uh-huh...’ and nodding the head. Let the patient talk without interruption for a reasonable amount of time.”

“When you need to be charting during the visit, be courteous and say ‘excuse me while I jot this down’ when you have to break eye contact,” Diamond adds. “Then, get into the habit of asking, at the end of each visit, ‘what other questions do you have today?’ In the long run, this can really help with communication, because it emphasizes that the doctor has time to hear a patient’s concerns.”

Resources

- “Clinical Competency Skills” by Balu H. Athreya, M.D.
E-book: www.booklocker.com/2663.html
Blog: www.clinicalskills.booklocker.com
- Joan Bolmer, Executive and Career Coach: www.bolmer.com
- The Doctors Company: www.thedoctorscompany.com
- “Ask Me 3” Health Literacy Program: www.askmethree.org
- International Listening Association: www.listen.org