



For you, your career, and your life

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Communicating Across Cultures: Nonverbal Skills Essential

How do you approach a patient whose culture is different from your own? Do you make assumptions too rapidly? Do you miss important nonverbal cues? Do you end up frustrated because your patient has a different set of beliefs about health care and doctors?

When you learn and practice techniques to bridge cultural barriers, you show patients that you respect their culture. You can also increase the likelihood those patients will comply with your advice.

“Health care services that are



“Really listening and suspending one’s own judgment is necessary in order to understand other people on their own terms... This is a process that requires trust and builds trust.

— Mary Field Belenky

respectful of and responsive to the health beliefs, practices and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse patients can help bring about positive health outcomes,” reports the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

One example of cultural differences is the importance a patient places on prescribed medication, notes Deborah Barrett, Ph.D., Professor of the Practice of Professional Communication at Rice University in Houston.

“In some cultures, a patient expects a doctor to give them a pill to fix a problem,” says Barrett. “While in another culture, the patient doesn’t see that as an answer. Also, in certain cultures, patients have a high respect for authority, and look to their doctor to be the last word.”

Other problems can arise because of the differences in body language between cultures, adds Barrett.

“Communication among people

When barriers of culture, language or health literacy frustrate you, it may be a signal that you need to fine-tune your communication skills. Consider your Resident Assistance Program as a resource for assessing and improving your interactions with patients, colleagues and staff. We’re here to support you in your quest to excel as a physician and a leader.

Call us at 813-870-3344.

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in the U.S. and German cultures tends to be low-context, relying on words to convey information. Yet in a high-context culture—Asian or Middle Eastern, for example—communication relies more heavily on the nonverbal. There is more emphasis on the context and less on what is actually said. Doctors need to be sensitive to how their body language comes across. They may be trying to reassure a patient with their words, but their body language may be sending a different message.”

The study of body language can be helpful in bridging cultural barriers. In a recent pilot study conducted at Virginia Commonwealth University, residents learned empathy techniques from professors in the theater department. The results showed a significant improvement in the clinical empathy skills of internal medicine residents at

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Money Matters

Tips for a Financially Healthy Holiday Season

It can be hard to resist overspending during the holidays. The National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC) offers tips on avoiding debt as the shopping season gets into full gear.

Consider gifts that have a personal touch, such as hand-made and homemade gifts, pastries or other prepared foods. Don't forget about fruit baskets, which are both economical and healthy.

Look for shopping deals. Check out retail sales, special discounts and coupons in circulars or newspapers and deals online. Consider purchasing holiday decorations in bulk and splitting the costs with friends and family members. These deals can add up to substantial savings.

Avoid last-minute shopping. Shopping under stress can lead to more spending. Plan your shopping trips in advance and shop as early as possible.

Pay with cash when possible and spend wisely. Stick to your spending limit. Leave your checkbook and credit cards at home to avoid being tempted to make unplanned and unnecessary purchases. If using credit is a must, limit purchases to one card. Use the credit card with the lowest interest rate and don't use more credit than you can afford to pay off in 90 days or less. Remember, credit card debt amounts to a short-term loan. The longer the length of the loan, the more you will pay.

Find more tips at DebtAdvice.org, a service provided by the members of the National Foundation for Credit Counseling.

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Bridging Cultural Barriers, *continued*

the VCU Medical Center after just six hours of instruction.

Need another reason to work on communication skills that help you bridge cultural barriers? Doctors who successfully show empathy to their patients—regardless of culture—are also far less likely to be sued.

Steps You Can Take

Check your own pulse and become aware of personal attitudes, beliefs, biases and behaviors that may influence your care of patients.

Use the ESFT model (explanatory model, social risk, fears and concerns, and therapeutic contracting) and the LEARN model (a mnemonic that outlines ESFT):

- Listen to the patient's perception of the problem.
- Explain your perception of the problem.
- Acknowledge and discuss differences and similarities.
- Recommend treatment.
- Negotiate treatment.

Ask the patient or interpreter to "repeat back" what you said during the informed-consent process, during the discussion of the treatment plan, or after any patient educational session with you or your staff. The repeat-back process is a very effective way to determine the extent of the patient's understanding.

Use the "Ask Me 3" approach, a tool that identifies three simple questions all physicians should be ready to answer—regardless of whether the patient asks. More information is available at http://www.thedoctors.com/KnowledgeCenter/PatientSafety/articles/CON_ID_000669 and www.askmethree.org.

Use language services for your limited English proficiency (LEP) patients.

If the patient refuses interpreter services, explain to the patient/family member that it is very important to the patient's care and safety that you and the patient/family understand each other. Suggest a referral to a physician who speaks the patient's primary language. Be sure to document all of the facts in the medical record.

- Partner with your health plans and hospitals to identify written and oral language services.
- Find out your state requirements. For example, in California, both MediCal Managed Care and Healthy Families health plans are responsible for providing language access (unless it is contractually passed on to the physician). In "fee-for-service" MediCal, the physician is responsible.

Get more information from these useful Web sites:

- www.hrsa.gov/culturalcompetence
- www.diversityrx.org
- www.thinkculturalhealth.org

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