



TIPS for Communicating with Seriously Ill Patients

Communicating with seriously ill patients can be one of the most challenging and difficult aspects of nursing care. Patients, their families, and caregivers often do not want to mention the possibility of death and dying, even in the face of great suffering. Here's what you can do to help your patient, keeping in mind that conversations with the patient cannot always be planned.

Be prepared:

- Know your patient's history and current situation. This is a way to help build their trust
- Create a supportive environment where the setting is private, comfortable, and quiet
- Allow enough time for conversation so the patient does not feel rushed. Include important people of the patient's choosing in the conversation
- Try to plan your schedule so there is enough time for discussion, however the best time for conversations may be during care
- Be culturally sensitive when caring for your patient. Know the patient's social and religious practices and understand how these factors may affect your patient's needs and desires. This is especially helpful for older patients

What to do:

- Maintain privacy
- Speak loud enough for the patient to hear you. Do not shout
- Listen with full attention. Limit disruptions or distractions including the use of cell phones and texting
- Acknowledge your patient's emotion with caring and empathy. It doesn't mean that you agree with the emotion but that you can understand how the patient feels
- Give your patient time to ask questions and express thoughts
- Use proper body language, tone of voice, and manners to communicate respect and understanding. Positive body language can include relaxed posture, facing the patient, an open stance, being at the same level and not standing over the patient, not crossing arms which may be perceived as being bored or closed communication
- Sit face to face, making eye contact and speaking directly with the patient and family members. Ensure you are aware of the patient's cultural practices. Ask the patient or family what would be the most comfortable and appropriate way of communicating. (Some cultures may find it offensive to talk directly at the patient, or to make eye contact).

Helpful statements to start the conversation:

- “Tell me more about,” or “how does this make you feel,” will give you clues to your patient’s emotional state
- Stating: “I hear your concern, your worry, or your frustration” is a helpful way to acknowledge that you heard what the patient was saying”
- “What have the doctors and nurses told you about your illness?”
- “How has this illness affected your life?”
- “What are you most concerned about at this time?”
- Offer supportive comments to your patient for controlling pain and other symptoms. Let the patient and family know that you will express their concerns to the nurse. Offer emotional support to them and their loved ones as you share this journey together

Other HPNA TIPs Sheets are available at www.hpna.org.

References:

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