Communicating Better with Health Processional

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it can seem like health professionals speak a different language. When we feel worried about a loved one's health condition, it can be hard to keep up with everything being said by a doctor or nurse. It's important to communicate clearly with health professionals. Good communication helps you be a more effective caregiver, leads to better care, helps family members feel like part of the healthcare team, and helps clear up confusion quickly.

FOUR KEYS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

We can all improve our communication skills. Researchers have found four key ways that we can strengthen communication in healthcare:

1. ***Be fully present***

- Before entering the health setting, take a moment to calm your mind. Breathe deeply.
- Make eye contact.
- Focus on the present moment – don't worry about yesterday or tomorrow.
- Set a positive tone.
- Maintain a strong sense of yourself.

2. ***Participate***

- Be prepared.
- Clearly state your purpose.
- Offer information about your loved one's condition.
- Ask questions.
- Assert yourself. When you assert yourself you ask questions, clearly state what you want, offer compromises, and set limits about what is acceptable in a care plan.

3. ***Build understanding***

- Really listen – with your full attention.
- If you hear something you don't understand, ask the health professional to clarify the point.
- Show that you understand what someone is saying by repeating it back in your own words.
- Avoid assumptions. Don't jump to conclusions. Allow others to finish speaking.
- State difficulties and concerns. Ask for help in understanding the reasons for treatment choices and recommendations.

4. ***Encourage working together***

- Focus on goals that you, your loved one, and the health professional can agree upon.
- Be clear about who is responsible for what and get extra help with certain tasks, if needed.

- Speak openly and honestly.
- Help with problem solving. Share information that you have that can help the health team make good decisions about care.
- Express appreciation. Saying "thank you" to health professionals who gave you help means more than you can imagine.

FAMILY CAREGIVERS AS TEAM MEMBERS

The role of the family caregiver is to serve as an effective member of the healthcare team, along with the patient, doctor, nurse, social worker, therapists, and other team members. Your goal is to help your loved one navigate the healthcare system and get the best quality care possible. Here is a list of key activities for you as a team member:

- Set up a file with detailed records of important medical information.
- Go to appointments with your loved one and speak up for him or her, as needed.
- Write down notes during appointments.
- Ask questions about anything that is not clear or sounds complicated.
- If you disagree or have a concern, speak up.
- Ask others to listen to your loved one's concerns in his or her own words.
- Provide progress reports to health professionals.
- If your loved one's needs are not being met by his or her team of health professionals, find a new team.

HOW TO SUPPORT TREATMENT PLANS

- Make sure your loved one follows medical instructions. If you have any questions or doubts about what is to be done, call and ask.
- Come prepared. Bring complete information about your loved one's current symptoms, condition, medication, and therapies.
- Be a good reality check. Help your loved one not to exaggerate, dramatize, or under-report symptoms.
- Reach out for help if something changes. Don't attempt to play doctor yourself.
- Tell the doctor when you seek a second opinion. It's okay. Health professionals are used to this and usually find a second opinion to be helpful.
- Educate yourself about the particular disorder your loved one has. Share what you learn with health professionals. They won't always have all the answers or know the latest research about a particular disorder.

RESPECT HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' LIMITS

- Be respectful of health professionals' time and emotional limits.
- Be patient; most health care offices are busy and see many patients every day.
- Learn the office routine – including the best time to call with medical questions, how to make appointments, and the name of the person who handles billing information.

Information provided in this fact sheet was adapted from materials submitted by the National Family Caregivers Association, Kensington, MD. For more information, visit their website at http://www.nfcacares.org.

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