



Challenging Emotional Conversations with Patients & Families

A guide to forming a therapeutic alliance with patients and families

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I*CARE

Interpersonal Communication and
Relationship Enhancement

“Emotional Labor is the mental work used to recognize and minimize emotions so they don’t rule the conversation.”

When you feel like saying *“Hey Buster, this is how it is,”* take a step back and use the protocol below instead.

Be prepared

Use non-judgmental listening

Six second rule

“Tell me more” statements

Empathize and validate

Respond with a wish statement

Be Prepared

- **Expect emotions** (your own and theirs) to come your way.
- **Have a plan** for how you will do it (especially if you have to give bad news).
- **Monitor what you think and feel** (awareness of your communication can make you more effective).
- **Practice self regulation** – Keep your own emotions in check when your buttons are pushed.
- Aim to **turn the confrontation into a conversation.**
- **Know when NOT to have conversation** (when emotions are too intense).

Use Non-Judgmental Listening

- **Remember it’s not about you**, but about the other’s disappointments, fears, anxiety, etc. which often underlie the anger, blame or denial on the surface.
- **Maintain eye contact.**
- **Listen** without interrupting only making clarifying statements and paraphrasing.
“So let me see if I understand...”
“What I hear you saying is...”
- **Put your own agenda aside** until the other person is finished.
- **Avoid** trying to make a situation better when it is grave.
“I’m sure things will not be as bad as you think.”

Six Second Rule

Avoid escalation of conversation.

- When your own emotions start to boil (especially in response to anger or blame), **wait at least 6 seconds** or more if needed for them to calm down.
- **Avoid being defensive/blaming**
“Well it didn’t work because you waited too long to get help.”
- **Gather your thoughts** and use skills such as *“tell me more”* or empathic/validating responses.

Tell Me More

Invite the person to expand on what they are saying.

- “Tell me more about your husband.”*
- “What happened after that?”*
- “What other concerns do you have?”*

Empathizing and Validating to acknowledge and diminish emotions.

Acknowledge emotions by empathizing:

- “I can see you weren’t expecting this.”*
- “This isn’t easy to talk about, is it?”*
- “It’s very stressful, isn’t it?”*
- “It must be hard to come here every week.”*
- “I can see how difficult it is for you.”*

Respond with a Wish Statement

Let the other person know you hear them and acknowledge that the goal may be desirable, but...

- “I wish I had better news...”*
- “I wish I didn’t have to tell you this...”*
- “I wish we had a more effective treatment.”*
- “I wish things had worked out better.”*

Important Tips

- **Stay calm.**
- **Avoid** phrases such as:
“I know how you feel.”
“I feel your pain.”
“It’s going to be alright.”
- **When emotions/behaviors escalate and you feel threatened/unsafe, end the interaction.**
“This conversation is making me feel uncomfortable right now.”
“I don’t feel safe right now and can’t continue this conversation.”

Resources

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