

Tips for Tackling Tough Conversations



Consider the setting

Ensure that surroundings are conducive to a serious discussion. Provide an open and affirming space for all patients, but especially to those who may commonly feel unwelcome or stigmatized. For example, use inclusive forms, rainbow stickers, and gender neutral bathrooms to show support for LGBTQ+ patients.

Lead with empathy

Discussing addiction and medication misuse can be sensitive no matter the patient, but with certain populations, the conversation may be even harder to navigate. Building a trusting relationship with your patients is crucial to ensure an open and honest line of communication about their health. Talk to patients in a way that acknowledges their strong emotions and reassures them that these feelings are normal and expected.

Focus on the patient

Staying patient-centered needs to be at the core of all of your clinical actions and decisions, from your physical exams to your treatment plans. The Institute of Medicine defines patient-centered care as “providing care that is respectful of, and responsive to, individual patient preferences, needs and values, and ensuring that patient values guide all clinical decisions.” Involve the patient in all treatment decisions and respect their preferences. Pay attention to their physical, cultural, and environmental needs.

Confirm understanding

Determine whether the patient is ready to discuss the next steps. When they are ready, check for understanding and questions and discuss treatment goals and strategies. You might ask, “What do you know about this condition?” or, “Did my response help answer your question?” These questions help to clarify the patient’s understanding and need for information.

Learn more

While every patient and every situation will be unique, there are models that can help you prepare for some of these conversations.

The “**ask-tell-ask**” strategy allows the provider to check the patient’s expectations, deliver information, and then assess for understanding.

The **SPIKES** model was designed for delivering upsetting news to patients, maybe about a terminal diagnosis, but can be applied to discussing opioid misuse or addiction risks.

The **NURSE** tool allows the provider to address and respond to the emotional response of the patient, which is critical when holding sensitive conversations.



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