

BEGIN RIGHT...STAY RIGHT

Understanding Difficult Patients



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Your heart pounds, your palms sweat, and your mind is racing out of control. There is an intensely uncomfortable feeling in the pit of your stomach, and the one thing that you currently want more than anything in the world is for this painful experience to end quickly. No, you're not watching a scary movie. Instead, you're dealing with a difficult patient, and unlike a scary movie, there is no pause button and everything that is happening is very real.

It doesn't matter what position you hold in your clinic, knowing how to handle difficult or dissatisfied patients is critical to your overall success. Studies show that one in four patients will be unhappy in some way. Furthermore, 96% of unhappy patients will simply go elsewhere when they are dissatisfied, and only 4% will actually take the time to complain. This may be pushing it a bit, but we really should be *grateful* for the 4% of patients who complain because they are willing to give us an opportunity to save the situation; unlike the remaining 96% of unhappy patients who will simply take their business elsewhere. Patients are walking billboards. They can be advocates for your work or testimonials to your shortcomings. To ensure that our patients always remain our advocates, it helps to be aware of what they expect whenever they express a complaint.

Show That We Care

Upset patients need to know that their issue is being taken seriously. If a patient is sincerely upset, and you intentionally or unintentionally give off the impression that their issue is silly and not worth your time, it is like pouring a gallon of gasoline on the fire. Remember, the goal is to get the patient back on your side, not to make the situation worse. Using skills to build rapport such as nodding your head, maintaining good eye contact, and paraphrasing what they just said, will show the patient that you care and that their complaint is being taken seriously.

Let Them Be Heard

Oftentimes, difficult patients spend a lot of time thinking about what has been the cause of their distress. Unfortunately, this time is usually used to prepare an angry monologue meant solely for the first employee they run into. If the lucky employee happens to be you, you can be sure that you're going to hear it – all of it. Too often, it is tempting to jump in with solutions before they have been allowed to fully vent their feelings, and that can make patients feel that you're not listening to them. Patiently and attentively listening to the whole story, no matter how tempting it is to jump in with your thoughts, is key. When the patient is clearly finished you can then use that opportunity to respond and offer solutions. In the end, the patient will appreciate that someone within the organization took the time to listen to their complaint in its entirety.

Always Be Accountable

Most people do not like to hear excuses, and that especially goes for our difficult patients. If a patient has been sitting in the waiting room for over an hour, and they decide to angrily approach the front desk to find out what is going on, they don't want to hear, "Dr. Richards always comes to clinic late, there's nothing I can do about it--sorry." While that may be true, your job is not to shift blame, it is to take action on the patient's complaint. Take a moment to find out how much longer the wait will be or try to make the patient's wait more comfortable. Taking action shows that you're willing to be accountable, regardless of who is at fault.

Remember to Empathize

It is crucial to remember that most patients are in a difficult predicament. The fact that one's health is not 100% is enough to make anyone cranky. Simply taking the time to try to understand our upset patients' concerns can significantly improve the situation. It is possible that

a patient is acting out in a negative way because they are scared about their medical condition and they don't know how else to express themselves. Ask open ended questions in an effort to identify the real problem such as, "What can I do to make you feel better about the situation?" Using empathy statements and putting yourself in the patient's shoes can help you to efficiently get to the bottom of the patient's issue.

Solve Their Issue

In the end, all that our difficult patients want is for us to solve their issue, whatever that may be. Be prepared to offer solutions to the patient, or you can simply ask the patient how they would like to see the issue resolved. While you cannot promise the world, there is always something that you can do for an upset patient. Offering solutions shows the patient that you are sincerely interested in finding a happy resolution for all parties involved.

Follow-Up and Follow-Through

Once you agree on a solution with the difficult patient and they leave the clinic, your work is not done. If you fail to follow through on the agreed solution in a timely fashion, everything that you have worked to repair will be irreparably destroyed. On the other hand, if you make the effort to follow up with a previously upset patient, that alone can have the power to turn a difficult patient into a loyal patient for life. ♦

What Infuriates Patients

- Rude and unempowered staff
- Being put on hold for extended periods of time
- Promises which aren't kept
- Phone lines being busy
- Unqualified or untrained staff
- Being transferred unnecessarily
- Failure to follow-through on requests

TIPS TO REMEMBER WHEN DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PATIENTS

Remember That It's Not Personal

Without question, the most difficult part of dealing with a difficult patient is learning not to take the unpleasant interaction personally. When a patient is raising their voice or blaming you for something that is not your fault, it can be hard not to let your emotions get the best of you. Remember that it is the *situation* that is making the patient upset, not you specifically. The patient would be upset regardless of whom they were talking to.

Don't Let One Difficult Patient Ruin Your Day

The overwhelming majority of patients at UCLA Health System are pleasant, friendly, and are genuinely thankful for the service that you provide every day. Do not let a negative interaction with a patient affect how you treat the many patients that value your hard work on a daily basis.

If a Patient Wants to Engage You in an Argument, Don't Take the Bait

It is human nature to want to defend ourselves when we are attacked, but taking the bait could be costly. The last thing that you want is to do anything to prolong the unpleasant interaction, or make a bad situation worse. Engaging a patient in an argument is never worth it, and besides, it's a battle that you can't win. Taking the high road will always serve you and your clinic in the end.

Stay Calm

It is instinctive to flee or fight when dealing with our difficult patient encounters, but neither of the aforementioned choices is the best plan of action. In the midst of a difficult situation, you can train yourself to relax by breathing slowly and taking deep breaths while reminding yourself that you are the one in control of the situation, not the patient.

Know What Your Hot Spots Are

If you become aware of what your hot spots or sensitive areas are, it will be easier to be prepared when someone tries to push your emotional buttons. You can always say to yourself, "even if this patient tries to push my buttons, I will stay calm and not allow anyone else's words to cause me to lose my professionalism."

Avoid the Phrases That Make Patients Angrier

If a difficult patient is getting agitated and raising their voice, it is understandable that you would like the patient to calm down. However, if you sincerely want that to happen, don't tell them to do it. Using phrases such as "calm down" or "don't raise your voice at me" is almost always guaranteed to have the opposite effect.

Make Sure That You're Not The One Being Difficult

Occasionally encountering difficult patients is simply the price of working in a world-famous healthcare environment such as UCLA Health System, and it's completely normal. But if you notice that most or all of the patients that you interact with are difficult or combative, then it might be worth examining if you are contributing to the problem in some way.

DIFFICULT PATIENT MANTRA

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PATIENTS CAN BE CHALLENGING AND VERY EMOTIONALLY DRAINING WORK. IT HELPS TO REMEMBER THESE WORDS WHILE DEALING WITH OUR DIFFICULT PATIENTS:

No matter how difficult the interaction is, when this patient leaves our clinic, I want to look back on the way that I acted and say with pride that I acted professionally and never stooped down to the level of the difficult or downright unpleasant patient. I will not allow the difficult patient to make me angry, upset, or frustrated. I will not allow this patient to make me unhappy or ruin my day, because no one has power over my happiness except for me. I do not have to be best friends with or even like the difficult patient. But for my own sake, I will continue to act professionally and courteously, and not do anything to shine a negative light on my clinic, the organization, and most importantly, myself.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Be on the lookout for a new BRITE Training customer service course:

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PATIENTS

Currently under development and scheduled for deployment in Fall 2008.

"No one can drive us crazy unless we give them the keys."

- Doug Horton