

## Got Competence when You Communicate? Active Listening Skills can Ensure Comprehension in a Multi-lingual, Clinical Environment.



Many nurses work in multi-cultural, multi-lingual, clinical environments where English is a second language. Whether your native language is English or you speak English as a second language, using active listening skills can help you communicate effectively with your patients. Active listening, skills and application: Here is a list of active listening skills, and the situations in which they will come in very handy.

**1. Open-ended question:** using questions that don't require a yes or no answer, but require an information-filled response is a great way to do an assessment. I am not just referring to a clinical assessment, but a communication assessment as well. If the goal is to better understand the context of a situation, an open-ended question is the best way to really find out. If you find yourself characteristically asking closed-ended questions, then shifting to an open-ended question may give you a truly accurate response.

*Example of a closed-ended question:*

"The doctor told you how to take your medicine, right?"

*Example of open-ended question, nurse to patient:*

"Please tell me how were you told to take your medicine?"

**2. Curiosity:** express genuine interest in what your patient is saying. It doesn't matter whether you agree or disagree; your tone (respectful) and body language (open, accessible) are two ways to express sincere curiosity. This curtails assumptions and encourages a more in-depth, specific response from your patient.

*Example:* "Can you say more about that? I want to make sure I understand you completely."

This simple question is a way to ask for clarification, particularly when a response is confusing.

**3. Repeating:** repeat back, verbatim, the words said; this allows the patient or peer to feel they have been heard and it can verify whether you understood what the patient said. This is a particularly important skill to use when comprehension is limited.

*Example:* "So, what you are saying is that the doctor told you is to take your medicine every four hours, even if the medicine makes you feel not so good?"

**4. Paraphrasing:** rewording/rephrasing what a patient or peers says in order to clarify what was said. Check-in to make sure your clarification of what was said is correct.

*Example:* "So it sounds like the doctor wants to talk to you about how the medicine is making you feel, especially how it makes your stomach feel; is that correct?"

Paraphrasing a response gives the patient a chance to correct you, if necessary. The addition, "Is that correct" lets the patient know it is OK to correct you; and, it tells the patient that you really want an honest answer.

**5. Interpret:** restate what the patient says in an interpretive way, with a focus on illuminating any underlying issues.

*Example:* "It sounds like it is hard to talk to the doctor about how the medicine is hurting your stomach; maybe you are worried that telling the doctor is not the right thing to do?"

By interpreting the patient's concern, regarding the expression of their feelings about their doctor, may provide a huge sense of relief. And your interpretation can then serve as an entrée into helping the patient talk to their doctor or it can be a signal to you to intervene on the patient's behalf.

**6. Cultural Issues:** help patients who are struggling to communicate effectively with their provider due to a lack of language proficiency, such as shyness or due to issues related to cultural norms. When you have determined that a patient is struggling, it is best to state what you think the patient is saying and then get a yes or no response.

*Example:* "Are you saying that you haven't taken your medicine because it makes you feel sick, especially sick to your stomach?" Wait for a "yes" or "no" response.

"And, I'm wondering if it is hard for you to tell the doctor that you are not taking your medicine because he says you need to take it, yes or no?"

It is fine to abandon open-ended questions in this instance, since it would be too uncomfortable and probably an exercise in futility with this type of patient.

**7. Language:** always use words that are easy to understand. Using the word medicine instead of medication is a start: consider saying to your patient, "your stomach feels bad or your stomach hurts." This is preferable over "how does the medication affect your stomach?" By choosing language that is easy for the patient to understand, it may facilitate getting the information you need. Also, it is important to speak slowly and use culturally appropriate gestures if it helps the patient to understand.

Using active listening skills regularly can make a significant improvement in communication with patients as well as your peers. Whether it is related to team accountability or insuring that patient's concerns and needs are addressed accurately, the use of these skills is absolutely worth the investment of your time and energy.

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