

How to overcome nurse-patient conflict with confidence

Nurses don't intend to create conflict with their patients and clients, but sometimes it happens. Let's say a patient informs you that his spouse will be staying the night. You might automatically respond, "That won't be possible," and walk away.

Yikes! Now you've got conflict. What do you do? You probably turn to a typical response to conflict: avoidance. You ask a colleague to deal with the patient, even though you know this approach won't resolve the conflict and might adversely affect your relationship with the patient.

Choosing to deal with the conflict is healthier for the patient and for you (and your colleagues), and it will foster trust. Your goal must be to try to understand where the patient is coming from, which will allow you to continue to provide the best care. However, you can get so wrapped up in the conflict that you make mistakes that can escalate it:

- **Insisting that you are right.** Most of us are in love with our personal perspective. Don't expect the patient to accept your way as the only way.
- **Playing the blame game.** Complaining about the patient's demand in the staff room will make matters worse.
- **Tuning out.** Sighing, rolling your eyes or rehearsing in your head what you're going to say next indicates that you're not listening.

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Keep in mind that your goal is to work on fixing yourself and on finding the right way to respond to the patient. Don't waste time thinking about fixing him. Address the situation positively:

- **Listen.** Give him a chance to offer his perspective.
- **Acknowledge.** Tell him what you've heard him say (you don't have to agree with it).
- **Take responsibility.** Begin the sentences in which you offer *your* perspective with *I*, not *you*.
- **Ask.** What is it that the patient needs from you? Ask him.
- **Follow through.** Initiate steps to move towards his expressed need or explain what the alternatives might be.

Your body language is as powerful as your words. Here are some dos and don'ts: (1) Before entering the patient's room, increase your confidence and lower your stress by taking a few minutes to strike a power pose (e.g., standing with your hands on your hips). Don't let the patient see you with slumped posture or your head lowered. (For more on these poses, watch Amy Cuddy's 2012 TED Talk on body language and how it shapes us.); (2) Create openness by consciously raising your eyebrows as you approach the patient. No furrowed brow allowed; although you might be deep in thought, you will appear to be angry; (3) Maintain an open posture. Don't cross your arms or legs.

On paper, describing how to deal with conflict effectively is easy; in real life, conflict situations can be much more complicated. ■

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