The Press Ganey snapshot is a monthly electronic bulletin freely available to all those involved or interested in improving the patient/client experience. Each month the Snapshot showcases issues and ideas which relate to improving patient experiences and customer service, improving workplace culture and improving the way we go about our work in the healthcare industry.

The snapshot features:
- relevant articles from healthcare industry experts
- case study success stories
- tips and tools for quality improvement
- patient experience and other industry research findings
- articles with ideas to help achieve success in your role

If you would like your colleagues to receive the PG snapshot please send us their names and email addresses. The Snapshot is published by Press Ganey Associates Pty Ltd. All material is copyright protected. Quotation is permitted with attribution. Subscribers are permitted and encouraged to distribute copies within their organisations.

Subscription to the Snapshot is FREE!

Please direct any comments, suggestions or article submissions to:
Manager of Client Relations
snapshot@pressganey.com.au

---

The Power of Empathy & Communication Symmetry

It’s not just **what** you say and do, it’s **how** you say and do it that patients remember.

By Julie Samuelson, RN, Principal Consultant Press Ganey Associates
A differentiating and patient-centric communication technique that allows health care team members to truly attend and connect with patients is through the expression of empathy.

Empathy shows patients that they matter as individuals, and that the caregiver authentically cares about their well-being. Communicating empathy is not always intuitive, but it is a skill that can be developed and improved with effort. That said, however, it won’t just happen from a directive to “improve communication” or “demonstrate empathy.” It requires focused learning opportunities, including practice and feedback, to embed it into a pattern of sustained behaviour.

Empathy is a two stage process:

1) Clarifying and gaining both a clear understanding and appreciation of another person’s situation or feelings.
2) Communicating that understanding back to the patient in a visible and supportive way.

Many of us as caregivers go half way. We may acknowledge and be sensitive to the patient’s situation, but we often don’t visibly show it. The real key to empathy is the overt demonstration and expression of sensitivity to the patient in a way that the patient perceives our support.

Empathy that is effectively expressed has shown to lessen the patients’ sense of isolation during their hospitalisation and is strongly therapeutic in its own right. It also facilitates the patient to engage in more open dialogue – often helping them to initiate the expression of additional fears and concerns.

The N.U.R.S.E. acronym is a valuable tool for demonstrating empathy:

- Name or mirror the emotion
- Understand the emotion
- Respect the patient
- Support the patient using powerful words
- Explore the emotion further

For example, consider the case of a newly diagnosed diabetic who has expressed fears about his or her upcoming hospital discharge by saying, “I don’t think I’m ready to handle all of this – testing my blood and giving myself a shot.” An empathetic response might follow this interaction model:

**Name or mirror the emotion**

"You seem very anxious."

**Understand the emotion**

“It can be stressful to learn something new like this that is so important to your health.”

**Respect the patient**

“You did a great job with both your glucose testing and insulin injection today.”

**Support the patient using powerful words**

“I’ll work with you again in the morning and I’ll let the home health nurse know you’d like her there right away on Tuesday morning to work with you.”

**Explore the emotion further**

“Tell me more about specific concerns you have about managing your diabetes at home.”

Importantly, caregivers must learn and then integrate the use of empathetic statements into their own, natural style so that it is genuine.

When nurses structure their interactions with patients to maximise the opportunity for the patient to be heard, they are able to assess both the objective and subjective needs of the patient. With empathetic communication caregivers can connect, engage and empower patients. Empathy fosters trust and a true partnership forms. If we are well equipped to understand and then act on our patients emotional needs, anxieties and fears, we are more likely to enhance their overall experience of care.
A good patient care team provides top-notch clinical care. A great patient care team goes a step further by providing exceptional clinical care in a manner that consistently communicates kindness, caring and respect, as well as the understanding that the most valuable voice in the room is that of the patient.

Fundamental to the delivery of that message is the concept and practice of communication symmetry in provider-patient interactions.

Recently, I was fortunate to be able to shadow a nursing team that aspires to greatness. I was there to support them as they implement a new rounding process designed to improve patients’ overall experience. One of the goals of the pilot rounding protocol is to strengthen the connection that occurs during nurse/patient interactions.

During my observation, nurses with symmetrical communication styles engaged patients as partners and equal participants in their care. Their behaviours clearly supported the expression of authentic caring and understanding that has been shown to promote patient healing. These nurses actively listened to their patients, conducted focused observations of patients’ nonverbal cues, managed their own responses to reflect what the patients were communicating, empathised with the patients and provided assistance, information and encouragement as needed.

I also observed instances of asymmetrical communication, defined by an implicit, often unintentional, imbalance of power. Examples include routinely addressing patients using terms of endearment, such as “love,” missing cues that indicated patients’ readiness to share a concern or question, inadvertently interrupting the patient while multitasking or abruptly shifting the conversation topic to something the caregiver perceived as more important.

In contrast to symmetrical communication strategies, which empower the patient, asymmetrical communication has the effect of devaluing the patient’s voice.

Research suggests that positive nurse/patient interactions significantly influence the patient’s overall experience and satisfaction, particularly when nurses optimise their presence through qualities that promote a trusting therapeutic relationship. Nurses and providers who are fully ‘present’ during rounds and who communicate symmetrically are more likely to recognise the verbal and nonverbal cues that can lead to deeper conversation. In turn, they are well positioned to discover and address unmet needs and improve the patient experience.

Because so much of patient care requires interpersonal interaction, the art and science of connecting with patients should be built into nursing and other medical curricula and competency requirements. Nurses and other patient-facing staff should be trained continuously and consistently in the practice of symmetrical communication — both to maximise the voice of the patient and to de-emphasise perceived power imbalances that threaten to silence it.