Communicating with Your Black Patient: Empowering Conversations & Building Trust
When healthcare providers interact with their Black patients, it is crucial to approach the conversation with cultural sensitivity, empathy, and an awareness of historical and systemic factors that have shaped Black individuals’ experiences with healthcare. It is also important that healthcare providers are confident in their ability to interact socially partner with Black patients in their care.

IMPORTANT VALUES TO PRACTICE:

- Practice the Golden Rule
- Listen. Learn. Lean In.
- Don’t Make Assumptions
- Always do your best
- Keep your promises
- Be open
- Remember your oath to always protect your patients
Healthcare providers should consider the following important factors when communicating with their Black patients:

1. **Recognize the historical trauma.** It is important to recognize that Black individuals may experience intergenerational trauma based on historical events such as slavery, segregation, and medical exploitation. Acknowledging this history with care is necessary, as it can have an impact on trust in the healthcare system.

2. **Building trust is essential.** Try to establish rapport and show empathy. Actively listening to and validating patient concerns can help foster trust and a sense of partnership in their care.

3. **Acknowledge and show respect for cultural differences in communication styles, health beliefs, and practices among the Black community.** While some patients prefer to communicate directly with authority figures, others prefer a less direct or deferential method.

4. **Be aware of stereotypes and biases.** Examine your biases, and do not make assumptions based on race. Treat each patient as an individual with distinct experiences and healthcare requirements.

5. **Inform and educate patients with respect.** While providers are experts in treating disease, patients are experts in their unique bodies living with an illness, where they live, and their lived experience.

6. **Work to understand and support overcoming socioeconomic factors that affect the health of Black patients.** Factors such as access to health care, income disparities, and environmental stressors. When necessary, be prepared to provide resources and support to address these factors.

7. **Strive for cultural humility by continually educating yourself on black patients’ diverse needs and experiences.** This includes understanding cultural norms, language preferences, and unique health risks within the Black community.

8. **Encourage open dialogue by creating a safe space for patients to express their concerns.** Address, if needed, any experiences of discrimination or mistreatment throughout the healthcare system. By openly addressing these concerns, the patient-provider relationship can become stronger.

9. **Promote Preventive/Risk-Reductive Care.** Emphasize the importance of preventive care measures, such as regular screenings and vaccinations, particularly for health conditions that disproportionately affect the Black community, such as hypertension, diabetes, and certain cancers. Understand that the Black population is a high-risk group and may need more heightened focus and surveillance than other groups.

10. **Support Your Patients in Overcoming Barriers.** Ask your patient what is needed to overcome financial, logistical, childcare, psycho-social, and other barriers. Then, follow up with support and resources.

11. **Follow-up is Key.** Follow up to ensure continuity of care by following up on treatment plans, referrals, and recommended lifestyle changes. Check in with patients regularly to keep track of their progress and address any ongoing concerns or barriers to care.

12. **Relationship is Everything.** Interaction with your patient can help build trust and help to overcome generational mistrust, changing how your patient feels and acts on their healthcare journey.

It is essential to provide clear, understandable explanations about diagnoses, treatment options, and risk reductive measures without negatively impacting, but improving and empowering communication with patients. Empowerment can be achieved by ensuring patients understand their health conditions and the rationale behind recommended treatments.

By building a strong relationship with your patient, you are empowering not only your patient but also their entire family and possibly generations to come.
As we reflect on how healthcare teams provide care, let us also consider the impressions you give patients.

- Are we integrating empathy in our interactions with our patient?
- Are you providing patient-centered care?
- Have we created a welcoming, calm environment?
- Do patients entering the health care setting experience a welcoming attitude of helpfulness from all staff, including flexible appointment scheduling, patient-friendly check-in procedures, and easy-to-follow instructions for referrals and tests?
- Have you incorporated patient-centered handouts?

Questions to Assess Yourself as a Healthcare Provider

- What assumptions might I be making about my patient?
- How much exposure have I had to black and diverse groups of people?
- Do I feel comfortable being around people from cultures I don’t fully understand?
- How am I working to ensure my patient feels comfortable with me?
- In what ways can I find out if my patients are comfortable with me and the care they are receiving?
- What biases do I hold and have an awareness of that might impact how I treat patients?
- Do I prioritize building trust and rapport with Black patients?
- Am I advocating for equitable healthcare policies and practices?
- Do I provide any appropriate case management for patients who need extra help?
Healthcare providers should consider the following important factors when communicating with their Black patients:

Patients want you to tell them what is wrong and keep the information patient-centered and then tell them what they can do and why. Empowerment comes from knowledge and the sense that there are areas in which one has control, and that is what one CAN DO. Focus on the “need to know and need to do.” Don’t limit information because you think the patient will not understand; adjust how the information is shared. They may want concrete steps. Patients want to know what all the possible side effects are. They want action. Used teach-back method to confirm understanding.

What do patients want to know from their doctor?

- Tell me what’s wrong (briefly)
- What are all my options? (specific to me and my situation)
- What do you recommend I do and why?
- What are the benefits (for me)?
- What are the side effects or risks?
- How can I get a second opinion?
- What do I need to know about as I figure out this issue (scans, tests, logistical, etc.)?
- When do I need to act on these recommendations and how often?
- What will this cost me?
- How will this impact my family, children, home life and job?
- How will this impact my quality of life?
- How should I talk to my loved ones about this?
Questions to Ask Your Patient

- Do you have any questions?
- What did you hear me say? (Can you tell me in your own words what I just explained)
- Is there anything you need me to reiterate or explain further?
- Have I addressed all your concerns?
- Can you think of any roadblocks or challenges to you getting care?
- Do you know how to find the information with your diagnosis, test results, and care plan?
- Do you know about clinical trials?

When working with your patients

- Use plain language. Think about how you would explain things to someone who is a family member.
- Make sure they have all the key points. Think about what is most important you want the patient to remember and focus on that. Write them down when possible.
- Be specific and yet concrete and avoid generalization. If action is involved, go through each step-in detail.
- Be curious and show respect for their concerns, questions, and opinions. Repeat and summarize the information.
- Most people don’t remember when they are told something once and may need to hear it a few times.
- Be comfortable with patients taking notes, recording an appointment, or offering to write down essential information and instructions for them in terms they can understand.
- Patients must feel comfortable with asking questions, and health providers should allow time for questions.
- Patients may become anxious, and communication and learning can be impacted. Be patient and communicate with respect and understanding.
- Lastly, be affirming, hopeful, and empowering. Your patients rely upon you to help get them through this complicated healthcare system.

References:


