



National Healthcare
Communication
Programme

RESPONDING TO STRONG EMOTIONS

CALGARY-CAMBRIDGE GUIDE



Making conversations easier

Aim to:

- Develop rapport to enable the patient or relative to feel understood, valued and supported.
- Establish trust.
- Reduce conflict.

Initiating the session

Preparation

How am I feeling?

- Reflect on your own feelings.
- Expect emotions (your own and theirs) to come your way.
- Know when NOT to have conversation (when emotions are too intense).
- Monitor what you think and feel (awareness of your communication can make you more effective).
- Practice self-regulation – keep your own emotions in check when your buttons are pushed.

Starting the consultation

- Introductions (name and role).
- Sit down at eye level with patient and look attentive, interested and calm.
- Avoid barriers such as a desk.
- Pay attention to your tone of voice (supportive), and the rate (slow down) and volume (gentle) of your speech.
- Demonstrate open body language, for example, leaning forward demonstrates that you are listening and are interested, while crossing arms and legs may be viewed as a defensive posture.
- Listen without interruption.

- Accept non-judgementally what the patient says by naming the emotion or summarising what they have said – *“So you are really angry because your mother is very ill and you have been kept waiting in this hospital for four hours, is that right?”*
- Acknowledge the patient’s situation and name the emotion...*“If I understand correctly, you’re feeling angry about not being told about...”*
- Respond to indirectly expressed emotions – *“...and you sound really worried.”*
- Wait in silence for the patient’s response to your acknowledgement.
- Do not counter with your own ideas - avoid saying, *“yes, but.”*
- Note that accepting the patient’s viewpoint does not have to mean you are agreeing with it – *“So you feel that this hospital is doing a pretty poor job. Ok let’s talk some more and then I can tell you what we have been doing so far to sort this out and what we are going to do next.”*
- Summarise where things are.
- Pause.

Providing information and planning

- Clarify boundaries and patient expectations.
- *“What would make you feel better about this now?”*
- If you feel that the patient’s expectation is unreasonable, address this and offer an alternative *“I understand that you would like me to... since we have never discussed this before, I will have to get more information.”*
- If the patient is angry about something you did – consider apologising.
- Many ‘complaining’ patients say that what they want most of all is an apology.
- Avoid jargon.

- Be honest and transparent - convey a genuine desire to help the patient.
- Let the patient know you understand why she/he is upset - acknowledge patient's concerns and feelings (e.g. frustration, shock, anger).

Closing the session

Forward planning

- Encourage the patient to contribute as an equal. Offer choices.
- If appropriate, offer help in the future... *"If this happens again, perhaps we could talk sooner and I could be more helpful."*
- Document the clinical care and discussions in a factual manner.
- Debrief – look after yourself and your colleagues.

Ensuring appropriate point of closure

- Avoid negativity.
- Summarise and check for any additional questions.
- Be clear and repeat next steps.
- Stay calm.
- If necessary, end the interaction.
- Avoid phrases such as: *"I know how you feel."*
"I feel your pain." *"It's going to be alright."*
- When emotions/behaviours escalate and you feel threatened/unsafe, end the interaction.
"This conversation is making me feel uncomfortable right now." *"I don't feel safe right now and can't continue this conversation."*

Building the relationship

Empathy

- Demonstrate understanding of the patient's predicament and feelings.
- Clarify the patient's agenda and summarise – *"So you want to talk about the delays in getting your test results back."*
- Demonstrate personal understanding – *"I can see this is very difficult for you."* *"I can sense that this has made you really angry."* *"I understand that this has been really frustrating."*

Provide support by:

- Showing willingness to help.
- Partnership

"I can see this has made you angry and I'll certainly try and help – give me a few minutes to find out what is going on and I'll come back and we can talk together about what to do next."

Providing structure

Making organisation overt

- **Summarise** at the end of a specific line of inquiry to confirm understanding before moving on to the next section.
- Progress from one section to another using **signposting**, transitional statements; include rationale for next section.

Attending to flow

- **Structure** consultation in logical sequence.
- **Attend to timing** and keep consultation on task.