Communication: Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship

What is Involved in Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship?

› The nurse-patient relationship is a foundation of nursing practice because patients experience improved care when their needs are fully considered
  • *What*: The nurse-patient relationship involves functioning within the limitations of the purpose of the relationship (e.g., purpose, place, and time of meetings/interaction are well established), therapeutic behaviors (e.g., self-awareness; respectful, genuine warmth; empathy; cultural sensitivity; collaborative goal setting; and responsible, ethical practice), recognition of the roles of the participants, and appreciation of patient confidentiality and the right to privacy
  • *How*: The nurse-patient relationship requires that the nurse effectively communicates information to the patient, but it also requires that the nurse listen well to understand the patient’s needs and concerns, discern what information is most important and useful to the patient, and provide information in a way that is understandable to the patient
  • *Where*: Establishing a nurse-patient relationship occurs in all settings in which nurses care for patients, including inpatient, outpatient, and homecare settings
  • *Who*: All healthcare professionals can practice communication skills to establish a positive relationship with the patient, and these skills can be used by assistive nursing staff as well. Confidentiality is important in a nurse-patient relationship, and the patient and nurse must determine if it is appropriate for family members and other caretakers to be present during discussions

What is the Desired Outcome of Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship?

› The desired outcome of communicating to establish a nurse-patient relationship is improved quality of patient care

Why is Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship Important?

› Establishing a positive nurse-patient relationship promotes high-quality patient care by the following means:
  • Promoting patient trust, which can decrease the patient’s anxiety and improve patient communication and adherence to the plan of care
  • Promoting clear communication between the nurse and patient can result in more effective patient teaching, and help patients voice concerns and questions about their care
  – Improved communication promotes more effective patient care, potentially reducing patient complications and conserving hospital resources
  – Clear post-discharge care instructions promote successful in-home care, which can improve patient outcomes and reduce the rate of hospital readmission
**Facts and Figures**

- Supportive nurse-patient relationships play a significant role in achieving positive health outcomes for patients and family members during traumatic life events that can result in long-term emotional distress (Newell et al., 2015).
- The role of the nurse is to keep the patient comfortable as well as building a trusting relationship that helps enhance the patient’s sense of security and ease the suffering of patients who are receiving palliative care. The benefits are mutual because positive, trusting nurse-patient relationships have been found to enhance nurses’ sense of personal and professional satisfaction and with the challenges comes mutual rewards (Weidinger, 2016).
- In 2009, the Joint Commission (TJC) identified improving communication with patients and families on all aspects of care as one of its National Patient Safety Goals. TJC surveyors began evaluating hospital compliance with the Patient-Centered Communication standards on January 1, 2011 (TJC, 2017).
- Authors of a systematic review identified a number of factors that influence communication between nurses and adult patients with cancer (Tay et al., 2011).
  - Characteristics in nurses that promoted nurse-patient communication included genuineness, competency, and effective communication skills.
  - Qualities in nurses that inhibited communication included being task-oriented, having a fear of death, and having low self-awareness of their own verbal behaviors.
  - Patient characteristics that promoted nurse-patient communication included active patient participation in care and engaging in information-seeking behavior.
  - Patient factors that inhibited communication included unwillingness to discuss their condition or feelings, inclination to seek support from family and friends, and use of implicit cues.

**What You Need to Know Before Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship**

- The principles of establishing a positive nurse-patient relationship include awareness:
  - that communication should be tailored to the individual needs of the patient/family.
  - that trust is promoted by the nurse introducing himself/herself and describing his/her role in providing patient care.
  - that families may need encouragement to express concerns.
  - that the anxiety of patients and family members can be reduced and the sense of control over patient care can be enhanced if care goals are set collaboratively.
  - of the limits of the nurse-patient/family relationship (i.e., well-established purpose, place, and time of meetings/interaction).
  - regarding the use of therapeutic behaviors (i.e., self-awareness; respect; genuine warmth; empathy; cultural sensitivity; collaborative goal setting; responsible, ethical practice).
  - of the roles of the participants.
  - of the need for patient confidentiality and privacy.
- Establishing a therapeutic relationship with a patient is accomplished in many different ways, but always involves communicating to the patient with respect, kindness, and compassion to encourage the patient to trust his or her nurse. Positive, effective communication also requires that the nurse listen and observe nonverbal expressions carefully to understand the needs and feelings of the patient.
- Preliminary steps that should be performed before establishing a nurse-patient relationship include the following:
  - Review the patient’s medical history/medical record for information regarding the patient’s current diagnosis and prognosis.
  - Become familiar with cultural factors that may need to be incorporated in the patient’s plan of care. (For information, see the series of Evidence-Based Care Sheets about providing culturally competent care to individuals of various cultural backgrounds).
  - If initiating a teaching session, gather the appropriate supplies, which may include:
    - procedural materials, equipment, or models.
    - written information to reinforce verbal education.

**How to Establish a Nurse-Patient Relationship**

- Identify the patient according to facility/unit-specific protocol.
- Establish privacy by closing the door to the patient’s room and/or drawing the curtain surrounding the patient’s bed.
- Effective nurse-patient communication is tailored to the individual needs of the patient. The following general interventions can help:
  - Address the patient by his/her preferred name. Introduce yourself and explain your role in the patient’s care.
Introducing yourself to the patient and family members is a basic first step in establishing a therapeutic nurse-patient relationship. Address the patient by name, and then introduce yourself and explain that you are the patient’s nurse. Offering your name is an act of trust that encourages trust in return. Using an individual’s name is a way of offering respect.

Shaking the patient’s hand at the initial meeting may help to establish trust and respect.

Determine if the patient/family requires special considerations regarding communication (e.g., due to illiteracy, language barriers, or deafness); make arrangements to meet these needs if they are present.

Use professional certified medical interpreters, either in person or via phone, when language barriers exist.

Encourage the patient and family members to talk about their feelings and concerns, and to ask questions.

Patients and families can be intimidated or frightened in healthcare settings, and may need encouragement to express their concerns.

Communication can be stimulated by asking open-ended questions (e.g., “Do you have any concerns or questions you would like to discuss?”), genuine expressions of interest, and stating that you have time to talk.

Listen without interrupting, and do not be afraid to respond with brief comments (e.g., “Yes” or “I see”) to encourage continued conversation.

Use positive nonverbal communication such as leaning forward and nodding your head to demonstrate your interest.

Show empathy and understanding.

Do not rush unless necessary. Take time to clearly understand the patient’s needs, both by verifying what he or she has said and by observing nonverbal expressions (e.g., tone of voice, body language, and facial expression). Making respectful comments about your observations can encourage communication (e.g., “You are grimacing—are you in pain?” or “You are sighing—are you feeling sad?”).

Encourage collaborative goal setting. Provide information and include the patient in decision making.

Patients can feel powerless in healthcare settings. Suggest ways for patients to feel more in control, and explain that you consider them a partner in planning and implementing their care.

Patients can be encouraged to participate more fully in their care by being aware of the care plan for the day, and being included in making simple care decisions (e.g., “Would you like your bath now, or after you have your breakfast?”).

Be culturally-sensitive. Recognize that awareness of the patient’s cultural background can improve the effectiveness of the delivery of health care.

Be aware of and respect cultural differences related to appropriate use of eye contact and therapeutic touch.

Recognize the limits of the nurse-patient relationship by demonstrating an understanding that the purpose of the relationship is to meet the patient’s need for health care, and maintain well-established, professional boundaries to limit the relationship, including a well-delineated purpose, place, and time of meetings/interaction.

Maintain patient confidentiality.

Demonstrate respect for the patient’s right to privacy by

- providing privacy during examinations and procedures
- Group your nursing tasks to allow the patient/family periods of quiet. Interventions that allow privacy convey kindness and respect
- not pressuring patients to talk or express their feelings before they are ready.

When discussing a patient concern or initiating a teaching session, use materials that will be easily understood by the patient and family members; provide written materials to reinforce verbal discussion.

Update the patient’s plan of care, if appropriate, and document details of patient communication in the patient’s medical record, including the following information:

- Date and time of the patient/family interaction
- Aspects of patient care discussed
- Patient’s response to communication and whether or not certain aspects of the conversation or patient education session require reinforcement
- All patient/family education provided, including topics presented, response to education, plan for follow-up education, barriers to communication, and techniques that promoted successful communication.
Other Tests, Treatments, or Procedures That May Be Necessary Before or After Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship

› Establishing a nurse-patient relationship requires no tests, treatments, or procedures; however, familiarity with the cultural background and traditions of a patient whose life experience is unfamiliar to the nurse can be a valuable tool in developing effective nurse-patient relationships

What to Expect After Establishing a Nurse-Patient Relationship

› Clear, complete, and trusting communication is established between the nurse and the patient and the patient care is optimized
› Positive, effective communication is established between the nurse and the patient’s family members

Red Flags

› Breach of patient confidentiality or failure to respect the patient’s right to privacy can be extremely detrimental to the patient and to effective patient care
› Monitor for nonverbal expressions (e.g., averting eyes, looking downward, turning away) that suggest the patient or family members are uncomfortable with their interaction with the nurse
  • Nonverbal cues can express information that patient and family members are unwilling to state, and indicate the nurse should reevaluate the effectiveness of his or her communication with the patient and family members
  • Nonverbal signals may indicate that the patient requires more information or clarification of information, or the patient may have unmet physical needs such as unrelieved pain

What Do I Need to Tell the Patient/Patient’s Family?

› After the initial nurse-patient relationship is established, continue to
  • encourage trust by explaining what the patient can expect during the course of his or her care. For example, if laboratory testing or other diagnostic procedures will be ordered, explain how these procedures are performed and when the results will likely become available
  • facilitate communication by responding to the patient in a respectful, empathetic manner
  • inform the patient and/or family when the treating clinician is likely to be available (e.g., to visit the patient in the hospital) and how he or she can be contacted to discuss the patient’s care

References