

Top Tips - Communication skills for GPs for effective care planning at the end of life

Communication skills are crucial for effective care planning and avoiding complaints at the end of life. The GMCs state of medical education and practice in the UK 2016, shows doctors at all levels are feeling under pressure. 12% of GMC cases leading to sanction or a warning in 2011-2015 related to communication failure.

1. Preparation prevents poor performance

In our profession, our words matter and our patients and those important to them remember them and take them with them on their journeys. We've all heard patients come in and repeat, whether good or bad, *'Doctor X, told me that ABC was going to happen'*. So, before you start a conversation, take a 'difficult conversation moment' and focus on the task ahead.

2. Identify the difficult part

Try to pinpoint exactly what the challenge of the difficult conversation is for you: perhaps your lack of knowledge, a lack of confidence or because it has a personal resonance for you.

3. Consider a communication framework

Consider a communication framework - Try using the [SCARS](http://www.difficultconversations.org.uk/how-we-do-it/) [link: <http://www.difficultconversations.org.uk/how-we-do-it/>] communication framework, a proven guide, which maybe helpful to structure your conversations. When used regularly, this becomes second nature.

- Setting
- Communicate with kindness
- Ask
- Reflect and Respond
- Summarise and Plan

Try applying and reflecting on your conversations, to build up your CPD.

4. Ask, don't assume

It is so easy to make assumptions – listening is different to waiting to speak. Before you start, ask your patient if they would like someone else to be present. Ask them what their understanding is and find out what is important to them. Remember to consider their language ability, cultural, psychosexual and religious/spiritual needs and wishes.

5. Pace the conversation

Understand where your patients and those important to them need support and guidance. Have conversations in stages at the person's individual pace. There is often a lot for people to process when they are hearing bad news and this can take time. Provide time for questions.

6. Is the time right?

If a person is not ready to have a difficult conversation, acknowledge this and ask if it would be okay to come back to the conversation another time.

7. Honesty is the best policy

Acknowledge that what you may find difficult to say, your patient may not find difficult to hear. Even if they do, they are often grateful for your honesty.

8 Document, document, document

Know the legal process: [consent, capacity and legal documentation](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical_guidance/consent_guidance_contents.asp)

[http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical_guidance/consent_guidance_contents.asp] and for everyone's safety: document all aspects of the interaction.

9. Sharing is caring

If, for whatever reason, you are unable to have that difficult conversation, ensure you hand the responsibility over to a person who can. Work in partnership with and signpost to your multidisciplinary colleagues and other services.

10. Know your limits: check your internal barometer

We're all human. It's important to gauge how you are feeling to enable self-compassion and resilience. For example, are you having a good day (8/10) or a terrible one (2/10)? How do you feel after a difficult conversation? (Rate again).

11. Compassionate organisations build personal resilience

Encourage compassionate conversations within your workplace – working within an empathetic organisation with supportive networks really will help to build your own resilience.

Some useful links:

[RCGP Palliative and End of Life Care Toolkit](#)

[Link: <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/toolkits/palliative-and-end-of-life-care-toolkit.aspx>]

Your patients and their families and carers can get help and support using the Marie Curie Information and Support service. The range of services include:

- Marie Curie's free phone Support Line, 0800 020 2309, offering confidential, emotional and practical support. Open six days a week from Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm and Saturday, 11am to 5pm.
- Live web chat service: <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help>
- Online community forum, <https://community.mariecurie.org.uk/> - a safe place where people can engage in peer to peer support to connect and share experiences with others
- And the Marie Curie website which contains a wealth of clear and easy to digest information* and support materials that cover all aspects of living with or being there for someone with a terminal illness. <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help>
- Marie Curie also provides a Palliative Care Knowledge Zone; our free and easy-access online information and support service for health and social care professionals. <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/professionals/palliative-care-knowledge-zone>