

# An Insider's Look at Dealing with Patients

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## Inside the Mind of a Patient

**A**s a nurse, your job involves taking care of your patient's needs. Those you care for are usually very sick, hurting, and probably frightened. Your attention to their physical needs is just the beginning--patients often look to their nurses for mental and emotional needs as well.

The best way to help your patient through a difficult time is to put yourself in their shoes as best you can. But how do you do that? How can you relate to someone with cancer if you have never experienced it yourself? How can you understand what a terminal illness is like if you have never had to face that diagnosis?

### Nursing and Empathy

Having empathy means being able to identify with a person's feelings or situation. It also means understanding why a person feels a certain way. You might have learned quite a bit about empathy while in nursing school, but now that you are dealing with patients on a day-to-day basis, you need to find a healthy balance between empathy and practical nursing care.

Communication opens the door to empathy. By simply listening to your patient, you can learn a great deal about what it is like to be in their situation. Always keep an open mind as you listen, and remember that as your patient talks, they are teaching you something you didn't have a chance to learn in nursing school.

Though you might not completely understand what they are going through, you can try to put yourself in their shoes by imagining what it might be like. For example, you've probably had the flu at some point in your life--so you can probably imagine that having pneumonia feels much worse.

Simply understanding that can make you a better nurse.



### Psychology of Nursing: How to Show Empathy

Let's be honest: we may say things that come out the wrong way, and we long to take the words back. This can be especially true when dealing with a patient. But take heart. With time, you can learn how to convey empathy without stumbling over your words.

Here are a few very good places to start:

- **Listen.** Sometimes simply knowing you are there to listen can make a patient feel better. You don't have to have all the answers, and you don't have to relate a similar experience. You just need to pay attention. Don't interrupt, and give your patient the time to speak his/her mind.
- **Repeat what they say.** If your patient tells you their stomach hurts, repeat the phrase back to them. "Your stomach hurts?" Then get more specific, and ask them to point to where. By repeating what they say, you make it clear that you were listening, and that you are looking for more information to get to the bottom of exactly what hurts, and what you can do about it.
- **Look them in the eye.** Making eye contact immediately establishes a connection. It shows your patient that you care about what they are saying, and proves that they have your full attention.
- **Educate them--and yourself.** Patients are often frightened and looking for as much information about their illness as they can get. The more knowledge you have, the more they will look to you for help. Make sure you have your facts straight, do further research if necessary, and try to give them the answers they need.
- **Never presume.** Don't say things like "I know how you feel" or "I'm sure you would feel better if you did this." Presuming you know how someone feels is a sure way to close the door on further communication. But it's always okay to say "Help me understand" or "What can I do to help you?"
- **Be understanding, yet firm.** If your surgical patient doesn't want to get up and walk around as per doctor's orders, be encouraging and compassionate--but also make it clear that they have to do this in order to get better. Humor often works well to cajole patients into doing what they should. "Hey, the sooner you are better, the sooner I quit bugging you!" can bring a smile and change in attitude.

Show empathy for your patient by acknowledging the way they feel, asking questions about what you can do to help, and listening carefully to what they have to say. Sometimes, simply knowing you care can put your patient on the fast track to healing.

## Communicating with Patients' Families and Loved Ones

**L**earning to properly communicate with a patient's family members and friends is a very important part of nursing, but finding that fine balance between empathy and legal constraints can be tough. Here are a few ways to approach the more prominent issues.

### What Nurses Must Know About Legal Considerations

While you were in nursing school, learning about HIPAA was a priority. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 holds privacy as paramount, and places strict guidelines on what can be shared about a patient's medical health.



This can get tricky for the nurse dealing with a patient's loved ones. If the patient has not authorized a release of information, doctors and nurses can provide only the most basic explanations to family members, and *only* if it is deemed in the best interest of the patient.

If you are being pressured by family members for information you can't legally give, ask them to write their questions down, and then speak to the doctor about the issue. The physician might be able to find a middle ground that will make everyone happy.

### A Lesson in Empathy: Delivering Bad News

The physician is usually the one who delivers information about a patient's condition, whether it is good or bad. The nurse is the one who deals with the fallout long after the doctor has moved on to another patient. Be ready to elaborate on the diagnosis, assuming the doctor approves.

Sometimes family members may ask a doctor not to disclose the full extent of the medical situation to the patient. Since each case is unique, meeting with the doctor before the bad news is given is a crucial step that can ensure everyone is on the same page. In a case like this, you should always follow the doctor's lead.

### Loved Ones and Hospital Visiting Hours

Hospital visiting hours are there for a reason. They provide quiet time for patients to sleep, an opportunity for nurses to catch up on work, and serve as a layer of hospital security.

But when a patient is diagnosed with an acute disease, it is often okay to bend the rules. For instance, if a terminally-ill patient wants to have their spouse in their room at night, most

hospitals won't say a word. Having the entire extended family in the room, however, might not be a good idea.

Bending the rules about hospital visiting hours is a judgment call that should be made on a case-by-case basis. This is an important time to follow your instincts and do what you think is right, within reason.

### **The Psychology of Nursing: Keeping the Peace**

Friends and family members can become angry, agitated, or even combative when their loved one is handed bad news. A few simple words can often diffuse a situation and restore the peace:

- **"You have every right to feel this way."** What they are going through is tough. Acknowledge that fact, and encourage them to talk through their feelings in a positive, constructive way.
- **"Let's work together for a solution."** This opens the door to further communication and allows friends or family members to voice concerns about their loved one's care. Listen to their concerns and their reasons, and then talk about what the options might be.
- **"I would be angry, too."** Saying this to an irate family member validates their emotions and says you understand. If they see you as an ally, their anger might dissipate.
- **"Let me try to explain this."** Throw out the medical jargon. Explain procedures, side-effects, and other issues in layman's terms, and answer questions in a way that can help the family understand.
- **"Let's go somewhere quiet."** If the loved ones become very emotional, take them to a private place. Sit with them, hold their hand, and let your compassion guide you.

When a patient takes a turn for the worse, emotions often run high--and as their nurse, you may be in the center of the situation. Remember that sometimes people say things in the heat of emotion that they would never say at any other time, so don't take any of it personally.

Always be supportive and caring of family members, but keep the patient your top priority. In the end, no matter the outcome, your compassion and empathy should be appreciated.

# Caring for Terminally Ill Patients

There are few things in life more unique than the experience of dying. Everyone has a different experience during their last days, and everyone around them has a different way of reacting to the loss. You may deal with many terminally-ill patients throughout your nursing career, and the care you provide can make an enormous difference.

## Nursing Patients with Terminal Diseases

You went to nursing school to learn how to care for and heal people, so it can sometimes be tough to take the palliative approach. When you are treating patients with acute diseases, their comfort is of the utmost importance. Here are a few tips to help you keep your terminally-ill patient comfortable:



- **Communicate.** Studies have shown that terminally-ill patients who have good communication with their nurses are more likely to be accepting of death, feel less stress, and be better able to connect with their family and friends. Simply talking to your patient can make all the difference.
- **Touch them.** A simple touch can offer healing power on many levels. It is a form of reassurance, a reminder that they are not alone, and a way to offer strength when theirs might be waning. A gentle squeeze of the hand or a comforting touch on the shoulder can make your patient much happier.
- **Make their bed comfortable.** As your patient weakens, they might not be able to move as easily in bed. The adjustable hospital bed goes a long way toward alleviating positional discomfort. Always ask if the bed needs to be moved, and experiment to find the most comfortable angle.
- **Monitor their pain level.** Terminally-ill patients are often concerned about the level of pain they may experience in their final days. By staying on top of any pain they might have and working closely with their doctor to ensure proper medication, you can alleviate that very significant fear.
- **Offer small comforts.** Sometimes the smallest things matter most. A touch of lip balm for chapped skin, an extra pillow for comfort, or the sound of a kind voice can make those final days easier.

## When Hospital Visiting Hours Don't Apply

In the film *Good Will Hunting*, Robin Williams delivers a powerful line that most nurses can relate to: "The doctors could see in your eyes that the terms visiting hours don't apply to you."

There are times when it's absolutely okay to bend the rules. The moment of death comes when it comes, and that is not always at a convenient hour. During those last days and hours of a patient's life, your primary responsibility is to ensure adequate pain control.

If emotional pain is eased by the presence of loved ones, remember that sometimes, hospital visiting hours really don't apply.

## Nursing Tips: What to Say and How to Say It

You probably learned about the psychology of nursing while you were in nursing school, but when you are faced with your first terminally-ill patient, it can be hard to know what to say. Here are a few tips that can help you through a few difficult conversations:

- **Offer spiritual care.** Tell the patient about all the options available for spiritual counseling. If they have a certain pastor or priest they would like to see, get in contact with that person immediately. Feel free to listen to your patient when they talk about spiritual matters, but never impose your own beliefs on them.
- **Keep your conversation positive.** Talk about the family that has just visited, or discuss current events. Talk about hobbies, pets, and other little things that make them smile. If they ask about their condition, be honest and upbeat, but don't offer false hope.
- **Simply listen.** Sometimes you don't have to say a word. Show your empathy by listening to what they have to say. Don't offer advice, commentary, or judgment. Simply be there, and keep your ears open.

## Respect Your Patient's Wishes

Most importantly, respect what your patient wants at the end of their life. If there are certain people they don't want you to call when the end is near, respect that choice. If they choose not to eat or decide to forgo any treatment that might prolong their life, remember that it is their very personal decision. Your acceptance of their wishes can help your terminally-ill patient die in peace.