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Practice Management Articles

How to POSITIVELY Increase Patient Satisfaction

- Lisa Philp, TGNA

People are porous. They tend to absorb and reflect the atmosphere and emotions around them. According to Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, we experience approximately 20,000 individual moments in a waking day. Each moment may only last a few seconds but each is important. Dr. John Gottman's pioneer research on relationships suggests there is a magic ratio of five to one, in terms of our balance of positive to negative interactions. This means that relationships are more likely to succeed when there are five positive interactions to every one negative interaction. Luckily, we as humans have a unique ability to turn negative thoughts and emotions into positive ones.

Logically, the key to improving patient satisfaction is to have the "magic ratio" of positive interactions between your team and patients. Communication should be thoughtful and purposeful. Here are a few ways to hit the magic ratio and positively enhance patient satisfaction and retention:

1. Pull, don't push. Your team's role is to be an advisor not a salesperson. Case presentations should focus on the patient and their needs and wants, not you and your treatment. Patients want to be empowered and informed, not sold. Avoid using phrases like "Here's what you must do", or "You need to do this." Instead use phrases like "You may want to consider, our recommendation for your particular case is or "This is what many of our patients choose to do."

2. Engage them. Always keep the patient involved in the conversation. Don't talk "at" them, discuss care with them. Focus on asking open-ended questions probing for understanding and their emotional needs. Create a dialogue, not a monologue.

3. Pre-frame and ask permission for every step you take. Always explain how they will benefit from what you are showing them and recommending to them. "Mrs. Smith, I would like to show you a computer presentation that will give you a complete understanding of what gum disease is all about and how it can impact your ability to keep your teeth for life. Is that something you would like to see?"

4. Be concise, but remember that it's imperative the patient is fully informed. Don't waste your patient's time. People want to be empowered and informed not overwhelmed. Give them some information and ask if they'd like more. Use visuals aids instead of words.

5. Be expressive. Your patient is a person who wants to connect on an emotional level. Use stories, metaphors and colorful words instead of only clinical facts. Engage as many senses as possible. Stories tap into the emotions and can add depth to your message, making it more real to them. But, again, keep your stories pertinent and focused avoiding idle chatter or rambling.

6. Give options. People like options. They want to feel they have control – especially when it comes to their mouth and money. Always present your best recommendations but also give treatment options whenever this is possible. And, when it comes to cost give patients options that do not stress their family budget including cash, credit cards and financing with a healthcare credit card like HealthSmart.

7. Respect their decisions. A long-term patient relationship is more than one decision to move forward with care or your best recommendations. A "no" today may turn into a "yes" tomorrow as their situation changes.

To make all interactions positive, be passionate about care, curious about people, an eloquent communicator and empathetic listener and always have contagious enthusiasm. And, as you hit the "magic ratio" you see your production, patient satisfaction and patient retention almost magically increase.

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NSDA Note: as a member of the NSDA, you have access to our "Principles of Best Ethical Practice" guide as well as a guide specific to good communication with patients. To access these resources, visit nsdental.org or email us for your copies at nsda@eastlink.ca