

How to Avoid Misunderstandings in Healthcare Conversations

A Resource for Providers



Accessible communication is vital for delivering equitable and inclusive healthcare, particularly for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

This guide outlines best practices, practical strategies, and key communication principles to help healthcare and dental providers create welcoming environments, adapt their approaches, and ensure patients and caregivers feel supported at every step of care.

Best practice includes assuming competence—engage the patient directly before seeking caregiver input.

Key Framework: 7 Cs of Interpersonal Communication

The 7 Cs provide a foundation for building effective communication and fostering trust in patient-provider relationships.

- **Clarity:** Use simple, direct language.
- **Conciseness:** Be brief and provide focused explanations.
- **Consistency:** Reinforce key points.
- **Compassion:** Show patience and empathy.
- **Confirmation:** Ensure patient understanding through feedback.
- **Consent:** Ensure legal documentation for consent while always engaging patients in decision-making at their level of understanding
- **Collaboration:** Foster inclusive dialogue between all parties

Core Principles

Effective communication begins with understanding patient needs, fostering inclusivity, and employing adaptable approaches that prioritize respect and accessibility.

1. Understand That Behavior is Communication

- Recognize that all behavior serves a communicative purpose
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues and body language
- Consider environmental factors that may impact behavior and communication
- Adapt your approach based on observed behavioral responses
- For example, if a patient covers their ears, they may be overwhelmed by sound. Offering noise-canceling headphones can support their comfort.

2. Understand Communication Needs

- Create a welcoming environment
- Train staff in using respectful language, i.e. person-first, or identity-first language.
- Use visual aids and adjust settings to minimize sensory discomfort.

3. Be Open to Modifying Your Communication Style

- Use plain language, avoid jargon, and adapt to the patient's preferred communication style.
- Allow extra time for responses and confirm understanding.

4. Leverage Assistive Tools as Needed

- Provide communication boards, visual schedules, or accessible consent forms.
- Utilize simple, clear visuals to explain procedures.

5. Collaborate with Caregivers

- Partner with caregivers for insights on patient needs.
- Provide clear, actionable instructions post-visit.

Strategies for Dental & Healthcare Providers

Tailored strategies help providers address specific communication and comfort needs during pre-visit, visit, and post-visit stages of care.

- **Pre-Visit:** Contact the patient or caregiver to identify specific communication methods (e.g., visual schedules, AAC devices, or sign language) and sensory preferences before the first appointment.
 - Document necessary accommodations in the patient's chart, such as extended appointment times, quiet waiting areas, or step-by-step visual guides for procedures, and ensure staff are trained to implement them in accordance with ADA requirements.
- **During Visit:** Explain steps simply, use visual aids, and confirm understanding.
- **Post-Visit:** Offer printed or emailed summaries with visuals and minimal medical jargon to reinforce patient understanding.

Practical Tips for Oral Health Providers

Oral health providers can use these practical, patient-focused techniques to promote comfort and understanding during dental care.

- Break procedures into small, manageable steps.
- Adapt instruments and techniques for patient comfort.
- Use short, visual demonstrations for hygiene instructions.

Implementation Recommendations

Ongoing training, material development, and feedback collection are critical for sustaining and improving accessible communication practices. Implementation recommendations include:

- Conduct regular staff training and self-assessments
- Collect feedback from both providers and patients
- Partner with disability advocacy organizations
- Incorporate resources from disability communication experts

Disability-Specific Communication Strategies

For Patients Using ASL Interpreters:

- Address the patient directly, not the interpreter
- Maintain eye contact with the patient
- Allow time for interpretation
- Position yourself so the patient can see both you and the interpreter

For Visually Impaired Patients:

- Introduce yourself and others present
- Describe procedures and environments in detail
- Use descriptive language for directions
- Offer to guide but ask permission first

References

1. Effective Communication for Health Care Providers: A Guide to Caring for People with Disabilities. Center for Disabilities Studies, University of Delaware. Accessed December 11, 2024. <https://www.cds.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/effective-communication.pdf>.
2. Developmental Disabilities and Oral Health. National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. Accessed December 11, 2024. <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/developmental-disabilities>.
3. Strategies for Effective Communication: A Literature Review. Accessed December 11, 2024. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11225999/#ref-list1>.
4. Practical Oral Care for People with Intellectual Disability. National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. Accessed December 11, 2024. <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/sites/default/files/2017-09/practical-oral-care-intellectual-care.pdf>.
5. Practical Oral Care for People with Intellectual Disability. Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. Accessed December 11, 2024. <https://iddtoolkit.vkcsites.org/>.
6. Dental Standards and Guidelines. American Dental Association. Accessed December 11, 2024. <https://www.ada.org/resources/practice/dental-standards>.