
Handling Difficult Situations

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When you work in a medical practice, you face challenging situations every day. Particularly as patients wrestle with pain, frustration and fear, you might find yourself handling a difficult circumstance from a customer service perspective. Practices that understand the importance of effectively managing these interactions – even in the most trying circumstances – will provide great value to patients while reaping long-term benefits.

The following tips can help you handle difficult situations in your practice:

Stay calm and listen carefully. It can be difficult to stay calm when your heart is racing and you are faced with a challenging patient, yet it is critical to remain courteous and attentive. Stop talking. Listen carefully to the patient, giving your complete attention to his or her concerns. Listen with your eyes, ears and heart. An apology can soothe a tense situation, whether you caused the issue or not. While “one size does not fit all,” a calm demeanor and careful listening go a long way.

Treat the patient as you would want to be treated. Avoid being defensive; instead, ask polite and sincere questions to help you better understand the situation. When you try to justify or over-explain, it will only sound like an excuse to the patient. A respectful tone builds bridges; a harsh tone erects walls. Consider the patient’s point of view, not just your own. Focus on the issues, not the personality. Importantly, show consideration for the patient’s age, culture and/or language, since there may be differences in perceptions based on the patient’s upbringing or belief system. Demonstrate empathy, letting patients know you understand their feelings.

Document the situation. If listening, asking questions and offering an apology such as “I am sorry that we didn’t meet your expectations” does not resolve the issue, explain that you would like to document the complaint and provide it to your supervisor. This attention often diffuses the situation and can protect you as well.

Gain a clear understanding of the facts. Don’t attempt to solve the problem before there is a clear understanding of the facts. Once you recognize the facts of the situation, tell the patient what you can do. Determine when you will call the patient back and follow through. Finally, you should conclude by asking the patient what else you can do for him or her.

If you can't solve the problem – but someone else in the practice can – record the facts and refer the situation to that individual. Ultimately, there will be times when problems cannot be resolved to the patient's satisfaction; in these instances, the physician should be notified. That (in combination with a bad outcome) can lead to a lawsuit.

Revisit the issue. After you have resolved the situation, consider the complaint again. Is there anything that your practice can do to avoid the problem in the future? Progress requires readiness to change. Reflecting on situations that gave rise to patient complaints may provide valuable insight into opportunities for future improvement.

When you are prepared for difficult situations, they will be easier to handle and lead to more positive relationships with your patients.

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