
Don't Say "Sorry"

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When your practice is running late, it is easy to greet the next patient with an “I’m sorry” instead of making a more meaningful connection. Although acknowledging the time and the patient’s frustration is a noble intention, a basic “I’m sorry” can actually start your appointment off on the wrong foot. Instead, try acknowledging the situation by making it more personal.

For example, you could share, “If I had an appointment with my doctor, I would be upset if she was running 30 minutes behind.” Then, stop talking and allow the patient to express his or her feelings. This action alone can make a tremendous difference in the overall visit. If the patient is still frustrated, ask for permission to address the situation. For example, “Ms. Smith, may I step out of the room for just a moment to see what I can do?” This action achieves two results: Time away can further diffuse upset emotions and the patient’s perception is that he or she has been taken seriously. There may be nothing you can do but return with a cup of water or tea, and let the patient know that the physician will be in within 15 minutes, yet this information can reassure a nervous or frustrated patient and make them feel heard and valued.

Another option is to state, “Thank you so much for understanding. We really appreciate your time and your patience. Is there anything I can bring you to make you more comfortable?” (Or, “May I bring you a cup of water to make you feel more comfortable?”)

An initial “thank you” can put the patient in a better frame of mind more than saying “I’m sorry,” making them feel more appreciated - and like you’re in this together. Even if not every patient leaves insisting that your operation is “five-star” practice, they will depart without immediately running to Yelp and posting a host of negative comments about your office and its schedule.

Naturally, this approach may not work every single time, but it will give you further time and space to potentially deal with the delay while giving the patient a chance to air his or her grievances. Ultimately, people want to be heard. Offering patients a chance to speak, particularly when they might be apprehensive about the appointment to come, is valuable regardless of the outcome. Consider opportunities for turning apologies into connections with patients to bolster your practice’s customer service.

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