

COMMUNICATION IN FAMILIES RELATED TO HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Families play a significant role in a patient's response to illness and in the process of both physical and emotional healing. Communication within families and between the family and health care professionals can greatly affect health outcomes, both for the patient and for the family as a whole. Often during the course of an illness, the family is confronted with changes in the patient's condition that warrant decision making, negotiation of caregiving tasks, and changes in the day-to-day function and communications within the family. Families may experience stress in multiple relationships, affecting the quality of patient care. As during other times of crisis, difficult family systems patterns, perhaps going back generations, can resurface. Unresolved loss issues may become salient. The good news is that there is then the opportunity to heal old wounds and create new interaction and communication patterns. Meanings created to understand and cope with a health crisis can significantly affect the outcomes for the patient and the family as a whole.

During times of illness, uncertainty and expectations can instigate conflict between families and health care providers. Expectations and desires of families may differ with the treatment, care, and outcomes targeted by health care providers. Moreover, health care providers may differ in their emphasis or values. Inadequate information and preparation regarding changes in care, communication problems with providers, and providers' enforcement of institutional policies and procedures can be sources of confusion, conflict, and frustration. Additionally, when the family's care expectations are not met, they may question or doubt providers' genuine interest and concern for the patient, the patient's family, or both. However, when family members experience empathy from hospital staff, when they feel listened to, and when time is taken to solicit their questions, concerns, and insights, the health care process is more comfortable and more effective. Family members praise nurses and doctors who listen to them, who seem to respect them, who share openly and explain

procedures and options in a way they can understand. This entry discusses the involvement of the family and community during health crises and provides recommendations for both families and health care providers to enhance the health care process.

Family Healing

Facing a crisis together can make families aware of their strengths. As they try to maintain their equilibrium, they may call on previously underused talents or resources, or they may turn to spiritual values that enrich their lives. People who have been avoiding painful issues within the family may be pushed or empowered to revisit them, with the potential for forgiveness, increased understanding, the healing of old wounds, and the strengthening of relationships. New communication skills are learned, and increased mutual respect and support can ensue.

Community Involvement

Friends, neighbors, and faith communities can provide much needed support for a family. To stay close to family, a patient may choose local care rather than be referred to a specialist at a large medical facility, and may choose a doctor he or she already knows. Parents of another patient may choose care at a metropolitan university hospital some distance from home, with the parents accompanying the child. For this family, extended family and community support (coworkers, church members) may make a crucial difference by providing meals or looking after other children. Community support in this case might also involve volunteers or support groups in the city where the hospital is located, contacted through hospital staff. Generally, then, it is a good idea for family members to talk with others, to give them the opportunity to help.

Sometimes, however, the community can be a stress rather than a support, for instance if a child is teased and isolated from friends because of the nature of the child's disease. In a situation like this, it is helpful for someone, perhaps a social worker, to talk with school officials to raise awareness and limit bullying.

Recommendations

In this section, fourteen suggestions are provided for both families and health care providers that can facilitate communication and support healing, and thus make the health care process more effective.

Families

1. Meet, shake hands, and make eye contact with each health care provider.
2. Stay available; be involved; keep lines of communication open.
3. Speak up. You have a right to ask questions and to understand. Your insight can be very valuable to successful patient care.
4. Help the patient (and others) stay calm. Learn breathing or mindfulness practices that can help everyone stay calm and clear. This supports healing.
5. Activate your support system: Consider talking to extended family, friends, neighbors, and your faith community, as well as hospital staff (e.g., clergy, family therapists, social workers) and volunteers. You do not have to do it alone.
6. Take care of yourself; share responsibilities and take turns; get some rest.
7. Remember to include and care for all of the children (both sick and well). Take time to talk with them and hear their concerns.

Health Care Providers

1. Conduct a brief initial interview to get an overview of the family system. Include a simple genogram in the chart. Remember that there is a wide variety of family structures across and within cultures; ask, do not assume, who is regarded as family.
2. Include the family from the time the patient first enters the health care system. Keep them informed and actively consult them, especially during times of anticipated transition.
3. Think of everyone involved as a team—nurses, doctors, family members, social workers, family therapists, clergy, and any future home care professionals.

4. Think about the whole family, including those you don't see. Dad or Grandmother may be home taking care of the other children but still is an important participant.
5. Remember the power of mindfulness. Teach patients how to calm themselves; teach parents how to calm themselves and their children. These practices can enhance the experience of a hospital stay, shorten its length, and also reduce the level of required medication.
6. Encourage family members to activate their support networks; help them identify potential helpers from within the extended family system, their friends, and other community members.
7. Connect families with additional sources of information and support (support groups, Internet, volunteers, others who are going through similar experiences). This is especially valuable for families and individuals far from home and those dealing with a chronic illness.

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See also Factors Influencing Family Health Values, Beliefs, and Priorities; Family Adherence to Health Care Regimen; Family Emotional Climate and Mental Health; Family Experiencing Transitions; Family Therapy; HIPAA: Privacy Laws and the Family

Further Readings

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- Wanzer, M. B., Booth-Butterfield, M., & Gruber, K. (2004). Perceptions of health care providers' communication: Relationships between patient-centered communication and satisfaction. *Health Communication*, 16, 363–383.