



How to Make Difficult Patient Conversations Easier

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This session will cover

- Understanding how certain situations can impact both your patients and your practice
- How to effectively plan, prepare and roll out communications to patients
- How to enable your team to feel confident and well equipped to handle difficult conversations
- Tools and strategies for easier and more efficient patient communication and expectation setting
- Q & A with Magali De Castro

When patients engage with a health service, they are often feeling unwell, scared, frustrated, stressed or even angry.

It doesn't take much for those emotions to intensify and turn into a negative experience at or with the practice.

When having difficult patient conversations:

I aspire to be _____

When having difficult patient conversations:

I aspire to be _____ ,
yet I tend to feel _____

What happens when we find ourselves in a difficult conversation?

- **What thoughts & feelings go through your mind?**
- **What fears/concerns come up for you?**
- **What worst-case scenario plays out in the mind?**

Whenever we **perceive a threat, it's natural
for our survival instincts to kick in:
Fight, Flight (run away), or Freeze**

Safety check:
Do we feel physically safe?

Safety check:

Do we feel **psychologically safe?**

Where an angry/frustrated person may be coming from

What's going on with them?

- Why do people reach a point of anger/frustration?
- Are they feeling psychologically safe in that moment?
- Usually trying to *regain* a lost internal balance
- Anger/frustration is the energy their **survival instincts** selected to get them through this
- What do they want? (*when we feel off balance/unsafe*)

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- Anger/frustration is the energy their survival instincts selected to get them through this
- What do they want? (*when we feel off balance/unsafe*)
 - To be heard
 - To feel cared about/understood
 - To feel supported (not alone & that someone's on their side)
 - And for the pain to be relieved (balance regained)

What else may be going on?

- People who may be under the influence of drugs, alcohol or other substances.
- They might be a generally violent/hostile person

*(Make sure you have a clear **zero tolerance policy** and that staff know how to **get help if in danger**)*

However, in most cases:

Aggression is caused by an issue that is handled poorly. This leads to escalation and we end up with an uncomfortable or even dangerous situation.

Situations can escalate to a difficult or even dangerous point when patients:

- **Feel mistreated, misled or betrayed**
- **Feel like a mutual agreement or understanding was broken (this could be an unspoken agreement. E.g. I come to you because the doctors always bulk bill me**
- **Don't feel they are being listened to**
- **Don't feel they're being taken seriously**
- **Feel powerless, trapped or like they have no options**
- **Feel there's more that staff could do, but they just don't care enough to do it**
- **Reach a point where they feel their needs won't be met unless they make it happen**

How to assist:

- **Prevent the situation where possible with clear communication & setting clear expectations** (e.g. Out of pocket costs, unexpected or known delays, expected timeline for things, etc.)

Plan out how to communicate & inform patients effectively

- **Be clear on what changes are needed & why** (have this consistent across team members & ideally simplified to a single sentence.)
- **Give enough notice time if transitioning from a previously established process**
- **Offer the update in multiple ways & repeatedly across various patient contact points** (eg. Practice website, on-hold message, when booking over phone, as an alert when booking online, proactively via a practice newsletter or SMS, on a sign/poster outside practice, at reception & waiting room, etc.)
- **Have handy a list of alternative options for patients** (e.g. nearby services who they may access instead, appointment types you will continue to bulk bill, dates/times you may continue to bulk bill, etc.)

Other ways to assist during a difficult conversation:

- **Stay clear on your intention to help & support within your scope**
- **Practice staying objective and focused on understanding, and also finding what's workable under current circumstances**
- **Seek to listen & understand the issue better**
- **Offer options or set a time to report back with an update**
- **Follow through with your word on timeframes/promises**

Practical tips for when things don't go to plan

It's important for staff to have a range of tools of things they can say or do in different situations:

Acknowledge their frustration and apologise:

- *"I'm sorry this is taking so long"*
- *"I'm sorry to hear that"*
- *"I understand this can be frustrating"*

Indicate next steps:

- *"This is what we can do for the moment while we resolve the issue"*

The L.A.U.G.H. framework

- **Listen**
- **Acknowledge**
- **Understand**
- **Give solutions/options**
- **Hit home**

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- **Give solutions/options: Or timeframe to return with an update**
- **Hit home: Follow up to ensure the issue has been resolved and there's no remaining questions or support needs**

Bullying & Harassment

- **No one should have to put up with foul language, abuse or disrespectful/derogatory comments from a customer**
- **If this happens, you can interrupt the customer:**
“John, while I’m more than happy to help you, I cannot do so if you continue to swear or raise your voice. Is that understood?”
- **If they continue:**
“John, I want to help you, but I simply cannot if you continue to swear at me. If this happens again I’ll have no option but to end this conversation. Is that clear?”
- **If that still doesn’t work**
“John, you’ve left me no alternative but to end this conversation.”
- **Hang up, speak to your manager & make notes of what happened while it’s recent in your mind**

Bullying & Harassment

If in person:

“John, while I’m more than happy to help you, I cannot do so if you continue to swear or raise your voice. And I will need to ask you to leave the premises if this continues. Is that understood?”

If that still doesn’t work

“John, you’ve left me no alternative but to end this conversation. You will need to leave the premises now.”

“We will call the police if you don’t leave the premises now.”

- **Alert other practice staff so there are more of you ready to help** (*Consider installing a duress button connected to all workstations*).
- **Once things resolve, document what happened while it’s fresh in your mind**

Self-care after a stressful conversation

- **Take a short break and check-in with yourself**
- Get some **fresh air**
- **Move your body or do something physical** (short walk or light stretches) to help use up and move along any stress hormones that got released
- Take a few **mindful deep breathes**: Breathe **in for 4 seconds & out for 4**
- **Be kind and patient with yourself**
- Have a **debrief chat with your manager** or with a teammate
- Book a **chat with someone who could provide support and counselling where needed**

Of what we've covered...

What have you found **most useful for you?**