

Volunteer Navigator Conversation Aid



First Impressions.....starting the conversation

It is normal to have a little anxiety when beginning a conversation with a patient. The following are some questions that have been developed to help you gain confidence.

1. How should I start the initial conversation?

It may feel awkward to begin a conversation, but as time goes on you will discover different questions that will help to "break the ice." Some of these ice breakers might be:

- My name is _____. I am a lay patient navigator. I am a member of the healthcare team that will be caring for you today. If I could help with one thing right now, what would you like help with?
- Did you have difficulty getting here for your appointment?
- If the patient is alone, you may ask if they would like for you to remain during the appointment in order to take notes.

2. What is a barrier to care?

It's important to understand what "barrier" means in terms of patient navigation so that you can learn to identify barriers that may prevent patients from getting their care. A barrier to care is a problem that gets in the way of a person getting the health care they need. We have identified 3 popular barriers to care.

- Financial Barriers
- Logistic Barriers such as transportation
- Social/cultural (Patient may have limitations that prevent understanding of the disease process or need for prompt care; patients may live alone)

3. How do I identify barriers for a specific patient?

Listen to your patient and try to understand what they think is the problem. Building trust with the patient will make it easier to identify barriers. When speaking with the patient ask what they think their barriers are to getting or receiving care.

4. Why should I focus on the patient's experience and not my own?

Just as each individual is unique, every person's experience with cancer is unique. By keeping the conversation focused on their life, needs, and decisions, you will help them make choices that are best for them.

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Partnering with patients and families.

5. **What if my patient wants my advice on medical decision?**
Your relationship is built on support, not on advice. Focus on your partner's concerns, who they have talked to and who they are comfortable with. If you are pushed to give an opinion you could say: "I just don't have the medical expertise to be able to give my opinion. I know these aren't easy choices but let me help you follow up with your nurse navigator, clinic nurse or provider. You are surrounded with some of our best experts in cancer care."
6. **What do I do if my patient is chatty and veers off topic?**
Some people will veer off topic easily and suddenly a 15-20 minute contact is filling your day. It is appropriate to pull the conversation back by saying: "I'm really interested in that, but I have a question about what we were talking about earlier." Most people will return to the topic with a prompt. If not, it is appropriate to say: "Unfortunately, our time is limited today but I'm really curious about what we were talking about before we changed topics."
7. **How do I know what to say next?**
One reason for using these skills is that with a little practice you will find yourself not worrying about what to say next. Your next statement will grow out of what your patient tells you. Listening carefully to what your patient says, for both the details of what is shared and the emotion behind the details creates what you will say next. Remember that pauses and silence in conversations may be just what is needed.
8. **How do I handle my patient expressing anger at their doctor, the hospital, others?**
Cancer does cause anger that can be directed fairly or unfairly at doctors, hospitals, and others. Your role is to understand the anger and reflect about it in ways that will let your patient vent about the anger. Keep your cool when patients take their frustrations out on you. Pain and fear may lead to increased stress, anxiety, and frustration, which can result in anger and even loss of control.
9. **How can I get additional emotional support for myself?**
Talking about cancer may bring up many emotions and memories from your past. The bi-monthly debriefing sessions that are scheduled are an opportunity for you to share. It's also important to remember that establishing and maintaining appropriate personal boundaries is important. This is difficult work. But it is also rewarding work. Our goal is to help you keep the focus on the patient. We have specific people who are willing to meet with you in a private setting. Please call our UNC Pastoral Care Dept at 984-974-4021 and request to speak with Darryl Owens or Patricia Cadle.

Information adapted from Carolina Well-UNC Lineberger Cancer Survivorship Program's Peer Connect Training Manual. Used with permission. 2014

Source: UNC Health Care, Chapel Hill, NC;
Oncology Roundtable interviews and analysis.