

# Empathy in Virtual Visits

The Center for Excellence in Healthcare Communication provides evidence-based training and resources in healthcare communication and service excellence throughout the enterprise. For more information, visit: <http://connect.ccf.org/CEHC>

## Establishing the Relationship

- Ask if patient is new to virtual care. If new to virtual visits...
  - Normalize any discomfort with the virtual platform.<sup>1</sup>
  - Demonstrate comfort and confidence in the technology (regardless of how you are feeling about it) to help patients feel at ease and focus on their care vs. the virtual modality<sup>1</sup>
  - Explain why telemedicine is the safest option for the patient given the current public health crisis. E.g., “Virtual visits are a safer and more convenient way for you to be assessed.”<sup>1</sup>
  - Let patients know what to expect so they are prepared to receive care through a new modality.<sup>1</sup>
  - Include instructions on what to do if the connection cuts out, and you cannot reconnect (e.g., you might tell them that you will call the patient and continue the visit over the phone).<sup>1</sup>
  - Explore together how to get the information you need for diagnosis and treatment. Explain so the patient doesn't feel like their care is lacking.<sup>1</sup>
- Introductions: In addition to identifying your name and role, take a moment to ask patients to introduce any other people who are in the room with them.
- Empathy virtually can be about asking and talking to the patient about their life: their home, family members, commenting on their environment, even simple things like a painting on the wall that you can see, etc.
- Ask them to show a meaningful object in their house. It allows you to get to know them as a person and to get a sense of their home environment.
- When assessing people amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, consider asking questions related to the following:
  - How are you managing with the recommendations to maintain social distance?
  - Do you have enough food and groceries in the house?
  - What have you found to be the biggest difference in your day since we started hearing about the Corona virus?
  - How are your loved ones doing? Have they been able to stay healthy and get their needs met?
  - What concerns you most about the Corona virus and changes that have been outlined?

## Express empathy nonverbally

- Comfortable, warm eye contact conveys you are interested and that you care. Remember to look into the camera, not at the computer screen, in order to make “direct eye contact” virtually.
- Be aware of your body positioning, movement, facial gestures, voice quality and vocal tone. Face the computer screen, don't move around quickly, and remain calm and approachable.
- Exaggerate motions such as nods and other actions so the patient notices them and knows you are listening.
- Develop a ‘video presence’ that includes staying visually attentive, exaggerating facial expressions at times, and ensuring the patient has a clear view of your face and body language.

## Express empathy verbally with S.A.V.E.<sup>2</sup>

- Support or partnership statements: “I’m here for you.” “Let’s work together to figure out what’s going on.”
- Acknowledge the situation: “This has been really hard for you.” “It sounds like this has been affecting your day-to-day activities.” “I wish there were better alternatives.”
- Validate their feelings or experience: “Given your situation, I think many people would feel the same way.” “Yes, it’s exhausting when we don’t feel our best!”
- Name their emotion: “I can’t imagine how scared you must be.” “You sound frustrated.” Or ask them to clarify how they are feeling: “How do you feel about it?”

## Developing and Engaging the Relationship

- Listen carefully to the patient. Do not interrupt or ask questions at this time. Let the patient know you are listening by providing cues such as nodding your head, establishing eye contact, and saying things such as, “I see.”
- Embrace the pause. Don’t rush in to fill the silence when the patient is expressing fear, confusion, worry, etc. It’s okay to be silent for a moment. They may need to collect their thoughts before finishing.
- Before you respond to their concerns, reflect back what they’ve said. This lets them know you were really listening and that you care.
- Verbalize empathy. “I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you.” “I’m here to help you through this.” “I wish I could be there with you in person.” “I hear worry in your voice.”
- Collaboratively develop a treatment plan.
- Express gratitude. It’s a privilege to help patients in their time of need. “Thank you for calling today. I’m glad I got to know you and hope that you’ll consider using Express Care Online again.”

1. Findings from studies conducted by the Office of Patient Experience Research, led by Dr. Susannah Rose, PhD.

2. Windover, A. K., Boissy, A., Rice, T. W., Gilligan, T., Velez, V. J., & Merlino, J. (2014). The REDE model of healthcare communication: optimizing relationship as a therapeutic agent. *Journal of patient experience*, 1(1), 8-13.