

Caregivers Role in Communicating With Healthcare Professionals

A lot can be gained by improving communication between family caregivers and healthcare professionals. Positive outcomes include:

- better care for the patient
- less stress and illness for the caregiver
- more efficient use of everyone's time
- more satisfaction for all concerned.

Here are some tips for a caregiver communicating with healthcare professionals.

Be sure the doctor understands your role. If your loved one is not willing or able to take instruction, make sure the doctor tells you all important information.

Articulate the practical side of your situation to help the professionals make practical suggestions you can use. (Example: "It's better for my job if we can come early in the morning.")

Educate yourself about your loved one's condition. Use the Internet as a tool, but stick with reliable sources that the physician will respect. Don't take in stacks of printouts. Organize your questions about the information you've read and be concise. Don't be afraid to ask questions, but try to be specific. Especially ask what to watch for that would indicate an emergency situation for your loved one.

Keep records of your loved one's behavior — habits such as sleeping, eating and emotional episodes, symptoms, medication habits, etc. The more detailed information you have, the easier it is for your doctor to give your loved one the best treatment.

Take time to make decisions about care. If it means having to wait a few days and it's not life-threatening, tell the doctor you need some time to discuss with your loved one or your family.

Appoint one family member as the main contact with healthcare professionals when possible. This will avoid confusion and save time for the doctors and nurses. The appointed person can clearly communicate all information and necessary decisions to be made with the rest of the family.

Hold conversations in appropriate places — not waiting rooms or corridors. You deserve to have the full attention of the doctor and the privacy that you will find in a room or office.

Ask about other resources. The doctor's staff can often point you to support groups, suggest help in paying for medications, in-home care and other things that you need as a caregiver.

Write it down. Have everything that's on your mind written down before you arrive. Once you're there, you might forget and start rambling. The more organized you are, the more help you can get.

Ask for a consultation appointment if you've got a lot of questions. That way the doctor will be prepared to sit down with you and talk for an extended time.

Understand the limits. Some questions the doctor can't answer, especially those beginning with the word "why" or those that deal with your family problems.

Separate your anger and sense of frustration about not being able to help your loved one from your feelings about the doctor. Remember, you and the doctor are on the same side.

Feel free to change. If you feel that the doctor is just not a good fit — either professionally or emotionally — ask to see a different doctor in the group or seek out another place of care.

Be appreciative. Don't forget to thank the doctor for all that he or she is doing. A little kindness and recognition goes a long way.