



Article Review

Communication at Times of Transitions: How to Help Patients Cope with Loss and Re-Define Hope

Evans, Wendy G., Tulskey, James A., Back, Anthony L. Arnold, Robert M.

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Key Points

- ✓ Patients undergo multiple transitions during the course of their cancer care
- ✓ Oncologists are uniquely positioned to help patients through transitions by (1) giving biomedical information, (2) showing care and understanding for patients, and (3) balancing realism and hope.
- ✓ Patients want oncologists to realistically discuss their disease state while fostering hope -- emphasizing what can be done: pain and symptom control, emotional and practical support, having dignity, being in a caring environment.
- ✓ Hopes are very personal, unique to the individual, and may include being cured, living longer, finding meaning in life, having special time with loves ones, finding spiritual meaning, and having a peaceful death.
- ✓ Patients want oncologists to help them set realistic goals for the future and to discuss the practicalities of day-to-day living
- ✓ Patients define attributes of a good death as
 - Freedom from pain and other symptoms
 - Having a sense of completion
 - Affirmation of the whole person
 - Being at peace with God
 - Being kept clean
 - Clear decision-making
 - Preparation for death
 - Contributing to others
 - Being in the presence of family
 - Trusting one's physician
- ✓ Ask-Tell-Ask is a technique for providing patients with information while balancing hope and realism.
- ✓ "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst" is a technique to discuss the possibility of less desirable outcomes.

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Hospice Compassus Team**

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Techniques To Help Physicians Meet Patient Communication Goals

Technique for Nonverbal Expressions of Empathy

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| S | Face the patient SQUARELY to indicate interest in his/her story. |
| O | Adopt and OPEN body posture as a sign that you are open to the patient. |
| L | LEAN toward the patient to show intimacy and flexibility toward the patient's position. |
| E | Use EYE CONTACT to show you are paying attention. |
| R | Maintain a RELAXED body posture to decrease patient anxiety. |

Technique for Verbal Expressions of Empathy

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| N | NAME the emotion: "You seem frustrated." |
| U | UNDERSTAND the emotion: "It must be so hard to be in pain like that." |
| R | RESPECT (praise) the patient: "I'm so impressed that you've been able to keep up with your treatment and the rest of your life while having these headaches." |
| S | SUPPORT the patient: "I and my team will be here to help you with the headaches." |
| E | EXPLORE the emotion: "Tell me more about how these headaches are affecting you." |

Example using Ask-Tell-Ask in a conversation about prognosis

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| | Patient: "How long do I have, doctor?" |
| Ask | Doctor: "That is important for us to talk about. So that I make sure to give you the most helpful answer, can you tell me first why you are asking?" |
| | Patient: "My daughter is getting married in July – I really want to be there." |
| Tell | Doctor: "With the treatment you are getting, I fully expect that you will be able to go to her wedding in July." |
| Ask | Doctor: "Does that give you the information you were hoping for?" |
| | Patient: "Yes, that puts my mind at ease to know that." |

Example using "hope for the best, prepare for the worst" in a conversation about prognosis

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| Doctor: | "Jim, the cancer being in your bones means that though we still have treatments that can lengthen your life, this cancer won't ever completely go away." |
| Patient: | "I have to keep my hope that I'll be cured." |
| Doctor: | "I share that hope with you then, Jim. I'm wondering whether we could also talk about what will happen if things don't go as we hope." |

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