

Doctor-Patient Negotiation: A Problem-Solving Exercise

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The first thing readers should know about negotiations with doctors is that they are different than negotiations you might engage in when buying a car or seeking a raise. In those cases, someone wins and someone loses. If you get a better deal on a car, for example, the salesman makes less from the sale. When you negotiate with your doctor, however, you both start out with the same general objective -- the resolution of your health condition. In these cases, neither doctors nor patients are trying to best the other. Both seek a plan of action that will best suit the individual patient. Sometimes, however, there is disagreement as to what is best. When this happens, negotiation provides a way to reach an agreement and are more like problem-solving exercises than anything else.

The need for negotiation may also arise when doctors and patients agree on what is best but not on how to achieve it -- or cannot even agree about the problem itself. Let's consider the case of a 75-year-old woman who feels that her health concern has not been fully addressed. The doctor, believing that the patient's problem simply reflects the aging process, suggests that relief of symptoms is all that need or can be done. Even though the doctor may be following the appropriate protocol and may be right, the woman fears her symptoms may reflect something more serious and would like the doctor to do more. What can this patient do? Does she have any choice?

Yes, she has several choices. If she feels too uncomfortable about questioning the doctor and discussing her options more fully, she can remain silent, do what the doctor tells her to do, and hope for the best. Or, she can leave, look for a new doctor and hope this one will respond differently. Or, she can leave, make a follow-up appointment with her doctor, and bring someone with her (family or friend) to provide her with support and/or speak for her. If, on the other hand, she does feel comfortable questioning the doctor, or can overcome any discomfort she may have, she can go ahead and ask questions. Doing so may leave her feeling better about the doctor's assessment of the situation and recommendation. If it doesn't, she can try her hand at negotiating a response that is more satisfying to her.

Questions she might ask include the following. What else could cause this besides old age? If I were young and experiencing these symptoms, what would you do next? Why don't you want to do more now? What could happen to me if we just treat the symptoms and it does turn out to be something more serious? If my problem really is due to old age, can the symptoms be relieved? What kind of relief should I expect? When should I expect this relief? How long should I wait to come see you again if there is no relief?

The Doctor's Response

If her doctor is open to her questions but does not have time for all of them, she may need to prioritize, making sure she asks the questions most important to her. She might also try to find another time to talk about the rest. If her doctor is not receptive to her questions then she may need to decide how important that is to her. She may want to find a doctor who is more willing to talk with her. At the same time, it is OK if she decides that the way her doctor responds to her questioning is not important enough for her to leave and find another. There may be other reasons why she would want to stay and she is the one who knows what is more important to her in the long run.

If a Discussion does occur it should help this patient decide whether she is willing to agree to just symptomatic relief or whether she wants to do more now. It should also help her doctor better understand her concerns. Finally, it should help them both reach a point where they can agree on what to do.

Negotiation Tips

1. Ask yourself what you want and how important it is to you.
2. Ask the doctor to explain your different options and why he or she might favor one over the others.
3. Listen carefully.
4. Repeat, in your own words, what you think the doctor is saying. Clarify any misunderstandings.
5. Explain and discuss where you are coming from -- don't assume that the doctor fully knows and understands.
6. Ask yourself, again, what you want and how important it is to you.
7. Reach agreement on a treatment option.
8. Set a trial period after which, if there is no relief, another option will be tried.

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