

# *Healthcare Communication Review*

Volume 2 Number 2

Online Edition

July 2002

## **Eight Communication Ideas**

Excerpt from *Where Souls Meet: Caring for the Seriously Ill*, by Dillon Woods

Windemere Publications, PO Box 25109 Los Angeles, CA 90025

310-358-6043 <http://www.livingwithquality.com/>

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These ideas are excellent points to be aware of to improve communication in any relationship.

**First: Avoid rushing in with advice when someone is sharing.** Give people the space and sufficient time to ventilate or talk through their emotions. As psychologists tell us, by expressing themselves, people often create their own solutions to their problems. Sometimes we just need someone to listen and as we talk, we find our own way. As they used to say in the monastery, “*God gave us one mouth and two ears. So, listen, twice as much as you speak.*”

**Second: Don’t pretend to listen when you’re not listening.** If you get distracted or go into a daydream while someone is talking, apologize and ask him or her to repeat what they have said. The sincerity you show in wanting to hear what has been said will be appreciated. Again, try to be present to exactly what is going on in the moment.

**Third: Don’t be in the future of a conversation.** This means not mentally preparing your response while the other person is speaking. Just listen. Don’t be distracted by thinking you have to control the conversation or add anything to it. Just let it flow. Enter into that moment as a relaxed, loving presence. Nothing else.

**Fourth: Be a patient listener.** Sometimes the...ill can go on and on (and on) about the most boring topics, and often they repeat themselves (heck, I repeat myself!). Be present with them and try to show that you enjoy being with them – regardless of what they want to talk about.

**Fifth: Put down papers, glasses, pamphlets, pens, books, etc.** Playing with these things will give someone the impression that you aren’t really interested in them or that you are bored because they are not interesting. Be focused and present. Show you are interested in the person in front of you.

**Sixth: Avoid glancing around the room.** As a listener, your body language is very important and looking anywhere, but at the person speaking, communicates that you are restless and bored. Show your interest in the conversation by using open body language. Lean forward when sitting. Avoid crossing your arms – which is almost a universal symbol of skepticism and having a closed mind.

**Seventh: Be patient as you try to keep the conversation moving.** Without putting them through an inquisition, try asking brief and relevant questions regularly and be sure to wait for a complete answer before asking another question. Sometimes people that are ill talk slowly or ramble on; it can be difficult for them to talk fast and stay focused. There may be as much as 30 seconds of silence between question and answer. Most people become uncomfortable with this silence and jump in with another question before the patient has time to give an answer. In many cases, the patient is not thinking of the answer during that silent time, but they are looking for the energy to speak their words. Remember, it's hard to talk when you are very sick. Consider that the ill person has several drugs in their system, a disease process going on, stress on so many levels and usually a good dose of depression. Have you ever been so sick that talking was a chore?...

Sometimes ill people also lose track of what they were talking about. By making a brief recap statement of what they were saying, you can help them get back on track. If it appears that they are stumbling and have lost their train of thought, you can say something brief to bring them back to the conversation. For example: *“so it sounds like you had a good time with your children this weekend. That’s great! What are some other things you did with them?”* or *“And then what happened after you went to the store?”*

**Eighth: Be sensitive to how physically close or far you are from the person who is ill.** More often than not they will appreciate closeness, but it's important that we be sensitive that this may change... Whether it's because of moodiness or upbringing, some people just need their personal space more than others. Different cultures dictate different traditions in this respect as well. Always ask before you move in too close.

Drawing on his experiences as a Franciscan Monk and his work within Hospice programs, Dillon Woods writes and lectures on communicating with the seriously ill.