



Responding to emotions and communicating effectively

Recognising and responding appropriately to the emotions felt by others will help you communicate effectively and encourage them to share information with you. Showing empathy is important for building rapport and an effective consumer/healthcare provider relationship. Without empathy, consumers are unlikely to trust that you understand and sympathise with their situation.

Below are some tips to help you respond with empathy.¹

Pay attention to verbal clues	It is often difficult for people to reveal sensitive personal information. When the person does provide sensitive information, take a moment to explore what they have told you. For example: <i>“You mentioned you feel overwhelmed. Can you tell me more about that?”</i>
Pay attention to non-verbal clues	A person’s body language may be at odds with what they are saying. It is appropriate to point out discrepancies to the person and seek to understand. For example, if you are interviewing someone who is fidgety, it is okay to say: <i>“You seem nervous. Can you tell me why you might be nervous?”</i>
Avoid being judgemental	Always put personal values and beliefs aside. Try to understand the problem from the person’s point of view.
Encourage	Offer praise. Praise will strengthen your rapport. For example, <i>“It sounds like cutting back smoking has been hard, I’m glad you haven’t given up trying”</i> .
Build partnerships	Offer support and arrange support from other health professionals.
Be aware of your non-verbal cues	Be attentive and make eye contact; this will encourage the person to be open with you. Your body language should show you are engaged. Avoid leaning back in your chair. Lean slightly forward and pay attention.



How to tell people about policies or delays they won't like

Sometimes it's not possible to give people what they want.

It is normal for people to become frustrated when they receive information about a policy they don't like or when faced with delays. When this happens, it's important to inform the person in a friendly, respectful way. Explain the policy or delay, what it means to them and how it benefits the community.

SESⁱⁱ can be a useful tool:

- **Show you understand:** Listen, repeat back what they have said and show empathy. For example, *"I can see that you're in pain/angry/frustrated"*.

It is important to acknowledge the consumer's frustration without 'siding' with them. For example, *"I know this delay must be really frustrating for you and I am sorry that it is happening"*.

- **Explain your position:** Ensure you understand how the policy operates and the reason for the delay/policy before providing the information. For example, *"This is necessary because . . ."*
- **Suggest another action:** Make sure you know of other options and offer them to the person without creating false expectations. If there are no other options explain this respectfully.

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1. Show you understand
 2. Explain your position
 3. Suggest another action

Examples:

"There is another delay in your surgery, I realise how frustrating this is. The surgeons are doing all they can to move through the list with the resources they have. I can't tell you definitely when your surgery will be, but your place on the list won't be lost."

"It's rest period now, and visiting hours are over. It's important for us to stick to our policy of not having visitors during rest period so there is time for patients to get some rest. This helps people get better faster. You're welcome to come back at 3:00 o'clock and stay for a while, or I can pass on a message."

ⁱ Haftel, Lypson and Page, *Patient-Doctor Communication: The Fundamental Skill of Medical Practice*, 2008, viewed 21 July 2014, www.med.umich.edu/medstudents/curRes/cca/m4/docs/2009/Patient_Doctor_Comm.pdf

ⁱⁱ Department of Health and Human Services, *Customer Service Training*, North West Area Health Service, DHHS, Burnie, 2010.