

8 Ways You Can Improve Health Communication

- 1. Know your audience, in general.** Begin by getting familiar with the “average” person in your intended audience. This means knowing about literacy level, language, culture, and age. It also means being sensitive to disabilities or emotional issues which may affect how the “average” person understands and uses health information.
- 2. Tailor communication, in specific.** But no one really is “average.” After you know where to begin, tailor or adapt communication to meet the needs of each individual. This may be drawing pictographs for someone who speaks limited English. Or teaching just one concept at a time to someone who has trouble concentrating. You can also tailor communication by giving resources to learn more.
- 3. Create a welcoming and supportive environment.** Whether your environment is in a building or somewhere in cyberspace, make sure that is safe, feels private, and encourages thought and reasoned action. As well, set a tone in which people can comfortably ask questions, disagree, or let you know when they don’t understand.
- 4. Communicate in whatever ways work.** People learn and communicate in a variety of ways. Beyond talking or using written materials, consider other communication strategies like sharing stories, using metaphors, or giving instructions with lots of pictures. Incorporate the principles of plain language in all your communication. This means using words that people already know, teaching ones they need to learn, and presenting information from the other person’s point of view.
- 5. Confirm understanding.** Communication is only effective when the other person understands. Confirm what people do and do not know. When there are gaps, rephrase not just repeat information. Make sure, as well, that you truly understand what the other person is communicating to you.
- 6. Offer ways to learn more.** You needn’t communicate everything to everyone all at once. In fact, this often adds to confusion. Instead, communicate what people need to know now and provide credible resources so they can learn more later.
- 7. Weigh the ethics of simplicity.** Your role is to translate complex scientific and medical information into words and concepts that people can understand. This is often hard to do, especially when information is ambiguous or conflicting. Consider the implications of your choices as you decide which information to leave in or omit.
- 8. Collaborate for good communication.** Health literacy and good communication go beyond just one person, profession, or program. Collaborate with your audience, colleagues, and community. Together, we can improve health communication.

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