**6 Tips for Dealing with Difficult Patients**

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If you are a nurse, you will likely have to deal with difficult patients throughout your career. These angry and upset patients can test your compassion, communication skills and patience.

First, learn to recognize the early signs a patient is becoming angry or upset, which may be a tightened jaw, clenched fists, or significant changes in behavior. Next, you can employ a few strategies to defuse the situation before it spirals out of control – such as these six tips for dealing with difficult patients:

1. Remain Calm

When dealing with trying patients, the best approach is to remain calm. Remember that the patient is not attacking you personally, but rather acting out on feelings of anxiety, a perceived lack of attention or resistance to what has happened to them. Remaining calm will allow you to keep control and address the patient in a way that will defuse the situation.

2. Engage in Conversation

Try to draw out the patient’s feelings by engaging in conversation. Frequently, they just want to be heard. Use the patient’s name, maintain eye contact and speak softly, even if the patient is yelling. Avoid negative language; instead try statements that begin with “Let me explain,” “May I suggest?” or “Your options are.” Or, ask if the patient has any ideas such as, “Can you tell me what you need?” or “Do you have suggestions on how to solve this problem?” Let the patient know you understand his or her feelings, and practice active listening: paraphrase back what the patient just told you, and then calmly explain the situation.

3. Be Empathetic

One of the quickest ways to calm an angry or difficult patient is by being empathetic. Remind yourself that it’s not easy to be in the hospital, in pain and away from loved ones. Rather than being defensive, treat all patients with respect. Tell them you understand how upsetting the situation must be. Demonstrate that you care about them, are interested in them and that they are important to you.

4. Avoid Arguing

Upset patients may try to pull you into an argument. While you are completely entitled to voice your opinion, it’s important to do so respectfully. Instead of explaining why they are not getting the attention they want, or why their medications were late, simply apologize and reassure the patient that you will take care of it.

5. Set Boundaries

When it comes to difficult patients who make seemingly endless or unreasonable demands, a useful approach is to set limits. Let them know you will check on them again in 15 minutes or a half hour, and then follow through. In some situations, you’ll need to set boundaries to keep yourself safe. Doing so can help avoid escalating anger.

6. Shake it Off

After an unpleasant interaction with a difficult patient, it’s normal to feel upset or angry. Take a moment to let those feelings go, so your whole day isn’t ruined. Take a deep, cleansing breath and as you exhale, let out all the stress and anger. Remind yourself that nursing is not easy, but you have the strength and skill to handle whatever difficulties come your way. Acknowledge that this will pass, and that you’ll feel much better if you shake it off.

# Comprehension Questions

# Literal questions

# If trying patients are not attacking the nurses personally, what are they acting out on?

# How do nurses draw out patients’ feelings?

# What are nurses supposed to demonstrate to angry patients?

# How should nurses explain their opinions to angry patients?

# What is a useful approach to difficult patients who make endless and unreasonable demands?

# How can nurses shake anger or upset off?

# Interpretive questions

# If nurses lose their temper, what would happen?

# Why do the patients want to be heard?

# Why do the patients not feel easy?

# Why is apology more effective than explanation of the reasons?

# Why can limits keep you safe from endless and unreasonable demands of the patients?

# What can nurses think of, throwing off unpleasant interactions with difficult patients?

# Applied Questions

# If you were a nurse, how would you handle difficult patients?

# How can you apply these tips in another/your situation?

# Sample Question: How do you handle difficult patients, such as ones with multiple complaints... needy... never satisfied?A1: I prefer to work night shift so I can avoid as many of these difficult complaints as possible.

**A2**: Kill them with kindness!!!

**A3**: The ones that TOTALLY get me are the ones who complain about the food. I mean -- it's SO childish to me to complain about a hot meal -- who CARES if it's not restaurant quality -- most of it is edible...

**A4**: Why do they fling themselves?

**A5**: The way for me to deal with unreasonable patients is to focus on their treatments.

**A6**: Most patients are fine, but there are some who also insist on being taken care of through the night, brought pillows, blankets, etc. One man got on my nerves so much -- was asking for us to feed him as he also was a diabetic -- basically wanting to be treated for "his" condition also. Would ask for sodas and crackers all night long .. .yikes -- get OUTTA HERE!!!!

**A7**: Had one lady this past week who chewed me out because her sister "lost" her glasses. It was too funny when the glasses were found in her nutty sister's bag after all. I REALLY wanted to go in there and say, "Well, thanks for bawling me out over it, lady!"

**A8**: I grit my teeth, grin and bear it, and kill them with kindness, and get through the shift, hoping that their loved one will be discharged before I have to come in next time.

**A9**: Night shift is the only answer.



