



Effective Communication Strategies: Helping People Understand and Remember Health Information

When individuals misunderstand, or don't recall the health information that you give them, they will have trouble using that information. This can make them less able to adhere to their care plans, which can result in less favorable health outcomes.^{1,2} By more effectively communicating health information, you can empower individuals to take better care of themselves.^{3,4}

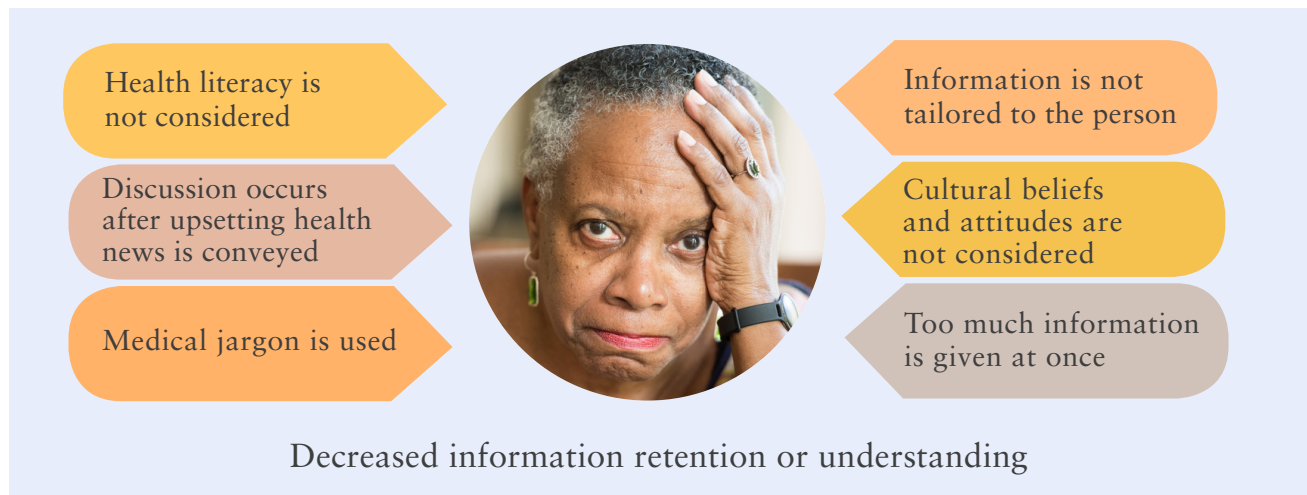
What Affects Retention and Understanding

Research suggests that people tend to forget as much as 80% of the information that health-care professionals tell them. Of the information retained, about half is remembered incorrectly, according to another study.²

Several factors may contribute to whether and how well a person understands and recalls health information. For instance, healthcare professionals may use medical terminology that is not widely understood, or not consider that

individuals may be distracted or overwhelmed after receiving health information, especially upsetting health news.^{5,6}

Health literacy, or an individual's capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information, also plays a major role. It can be difficult to determine health literacy simply by talking to people or by considering their general literacy or education. Anyone may have trouble understanding health information, especially when it is complex or not presented clearly. That's why healthcare professionals should use effective communication methods when talking with *all* individuals.⁷



Source: This exhibit draws from the work of the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion,⁷ L. Killian and M. Coletti,⁵ Leslie R. Martin, et al,⁶ and Narayan MC.⁹



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Basic Communication Strategies

To make health information more accessible, easier to understand, and remember, you can incorporate the following conversation strategies.

Avoid medical jargon. If people don't know what the words you use mean, they cannot understand you.⁸

- ▶ Use simple, everyday language (eg, “stomach” or “belly” instead of “abdomen”).⁸
- ▶ Listen for the words that an individual uses for medical terms (eg, “blood sugar”) and adopt those when talking with that person.⁸

Instead of saying this:



“Hyperglycemia raises your risk of diabetic foot ulcers.”

Try simpler language:



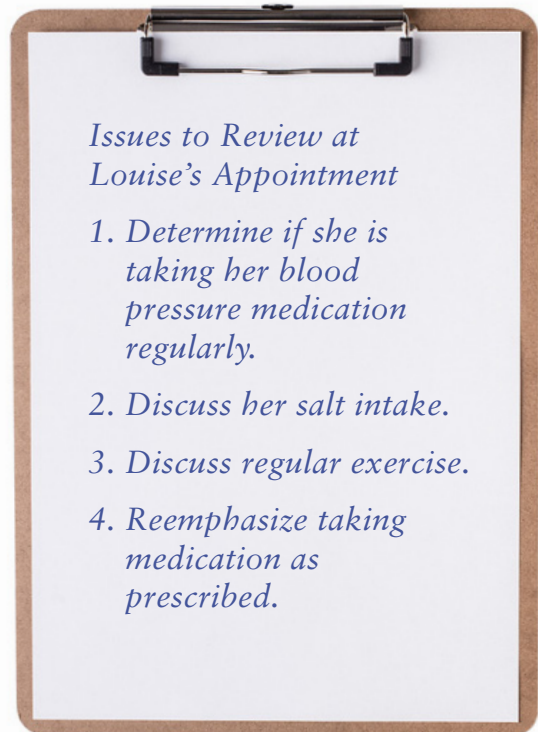
“You will lower your risk of developing sores on your feet by keeping your blood sugar low.”

Prioritize and limit the information discussed.

People who are given too much information at once are likely to forget at least some of it.⁶

- ▶ Instead of a long list of health to-dos, focus on three to five key points.⁸
- ▶ Use “chunk and check” to make complex information more manageable. Break down information into smaller segments. Then, check the individual's understanding of each concept.⁸ (See the “Teach-Back Method” on page 6.)
- ▶ Talk about the most important information at the beginning and at the end of your encounter. People are more likely to remember the first and last things they hear.⁶

Example





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Tailor information to the individual person. People are more likely to pay attention to information that reflects their particular circumstances.⁶

- ▶ Personalize the information so it is more meaningful to the individual and, thus, more likely to be remembered. For instance, relate instructions or advice to the individual’s diagnosis and situation.

Instead of a general statement:



“You need to remember to take your medicine every day.”

Try a more personal approach:



“Let’s find a way for you to remember to take your heart medicine.

You said you feed your dog first thing in the morning. Maybe you could put your pill bottle by his food to help you remember to take your medicine.”

Consider cultural beliefs and attitudes.



Take time to learn about the norms, values, and practices of cultures prevalent in your population. You can personalize information more easily if you know about, for example, the foods that are commonly eaten and the health treatments that are embraced. Ensure the care plan addresses the cultural preferences that you have identified.⁹

However, be careful not to make assumptions about a person based solely on his or her cultural heritage. Instead, treat everyone as an individual. Ask open-ended questions, and listen carefully to discern each person’s needs and preferences. Ensure the care plan addresses the cultural preferences you have identified.⁹

When language barriers exist, seek a medical interpreter to help you communicate.^{9,10}

Adopt memory aids. Pictures and other visual communication tactics can supplement your verbal instructions:

- ▶ Use or create simple pictures, illustrations, or 3D models to explain medical information.^{6,8}
- ▶ Demonstrate how it’s done. For instance, demonstrate how to use an asthma inhaler.⁸
- ▶ Encourage individuals to take their own notes during the visit.⁶



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Instead of saying:

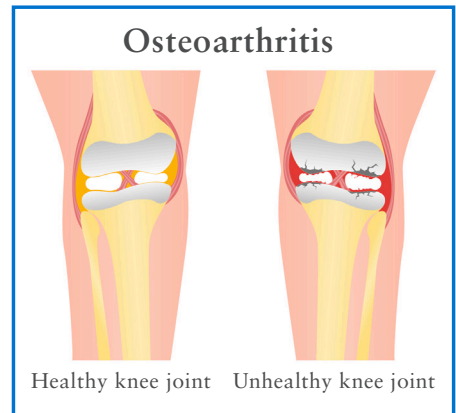


“The arthritis in your knee has worsened. You have barely any cartilage left.”

Show—and describe—a picture that shows a healthy joint compared to a joint with little cartilage left.



“Look at the illustration of a healthy joint. The orange area shows how the bones have some cushioning between them. This is cartilage. Now, look at the joint with osteoarthritis. Most of the cartilage is gone. This is what’s happened to your knee. Without that cushion, your knee can feel very painful.”



Encourage individuals to ask

questions and participate. People tend to recall less after a one-way conversation dominated by a healthcare professional.¹ Having individuals actively participate may improve their understanding and ability to recall the information.⁸

- ▶ Avoid asking closed-ended questions like: “Do you understand?” or “Do you have any questions?” People often reply “no” when you ask questions phrased this way, even if they would like to know more.
- ▶ Assume everyone has questions. Ask specifically: “What questions do you have?”
- ▶ Find ways to get the individual’s input several times during your visit.

Three effective ways to elicit questions:



“What questions do you have?”



“We just talked about a lot. What do you want to go over again?”



“What do you want to discuss further?”



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Ask

Use open-ended questions to find out what the individual knows, wants to know, thinks, or feels about his or her health.

“What do you want to know about your [diabetes]?”
“What do you think is causing your symptoms?”
“How do you feel about having this condition?”

Tell

Provide the individual with the information that she or he needs/wants to know.

“Research suggests...”
“Other people have said...”
“What we know...”

Ask

Follow up with additional questions to ensure the individual understands the information you provided.

“What does this information mean to you?”
“How are you going to [keep track of your medications]?”
“How can I help?”

Ask–Tell–Ask Strategy

To tailor information to an individual’s needs, you need to pay attention to two issues:

- ▶ Providing the right amount of information at the right time

- ▶ Ensuring that the information you give is personally meaningful

Ask-Tell-Ask is a strategy that is useful for tailoring information. First, ask individuals for permission to discuss their health. Then ask them what they want or need to know, provide the requested information in a nonjudgmental manner, and ask questions to ensure they understand the information.^{11,12}





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“I want to make sure I explained everything clearly. Tell me what you understood.”



“Can you tell me what you need to do when you get home?”



“What will you tell your spouse about what we discussed today?”

The Teach-Back Method

Another effective strategy to assess understanding and enhance comprehension is to use the teach-back method. Teach-back involves asking individuals to explain what you have told them in their own words.²

This method (sometimes called the show-me method) can also be effective when you teach people actions they need to perform, such as giving themselves an injection or using an inhaler. Asking an individual to demonstrate the required action allows you to see whether the instructions have been properly understood.²

To use the teach-back method, begin by asking the individual to explain or demonstrate what they learned from you. However, don't ask “Do you understand?”² You're not looking for a “yes” or “no” answer. Instead, phrase the question in an open-ended way that prompts the individual to explain to you what they understand.⁸ See the three examples above.

If the person cannot teach the information back to you, then you need to reteach using a different communication approach.





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