

## Answers to Every Patient Question

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As an organizer at a recent college workshop, I heard these questions about patient education asked again and again: "But what do I say?" and "How do I tell them?"

Did these students not know the answers? Or were they unsure of how to communicate them? Or maybe they thought there was one magic formula or a perfect script for a chiropractor to spit out when a patient asks a question. You know, a set response to every question. Yea, that's it. So, if a patient says, "I feel fine, I'm not going to come back," the chiropractor can say, "I'm glad you're feeling better, but research shows that just because you don't have symptoms does not mean that your body has had the chance to heal. Remember when we talked about the vertebral subluxation complex effecting more than just the alignment of your spine? Muscles and tissues are effected as well by subluxations. So I recommend that you continue care."

Great. But what if you're talking to a two-year-old? The answer changes.

One of the most important things to remember in effective communication is consider your audience. Relate to patients on their level and through something they will understand. Yes, it is helpful to run through answers in your mind and even practice them verbally. However, let's not forget one of the basic principles in chiropractic: Each and every person who enters your office is unique. Chiropractic individualizes patients when it clinically evaluates them. So why doesn't it do the same in its communications with them?

Use the patient's background and their own expertise to relate chiropractic to them. For example, if you're talking with an auto mechanic, relate how the body works in comparison with how a car works. If you're talking with a priest, you might want to talk about innate intelligence and the body's wonderful power to heal itself. If you're talking with a housewife, consider talking about the organization of the body and what happens when the nervous system does not function and there is interference (just like when you go to pick up Johnny from football practice and he's not done -- there's interference in your plan, in the organization of your day).

Just as in your everyday life, you talk sports with Packer fan Dan, weather with the postman, and politics with the mayor; talk in language that directly relates to your patient's background.

Does this sound like it's difficult to do? It does take a creative mind, experience, and practice. And fortunately, there are resources out there to help you and your staff do this.

After considering your audience and relating to them directly and specifically, remember the final loop in communication: feedback. Ask questions to make sure that you've related to them. Try:

*"Do you understand?"*

*"Does that make sense?"*

*"Do you agree?"*

Or better yet, ask open-ended questions to get real response on what you have communicated:

"I want to be sure that I was easy to understand. Would you please tell me, in your own words, what message you got from what I just said?"

"You look puzzled, what do I need to talk more about?"

"Please feel comfortable asking me questions. What questions do you have?"

Again, remember to consider the individual. You can tailor your questions to the individual just as easily as you can the "answers." Most of all, as most any communications expert would say: Tell them in your own way. Remain honest and open realizing that you are learning to fine-tune your communications skills every day.

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