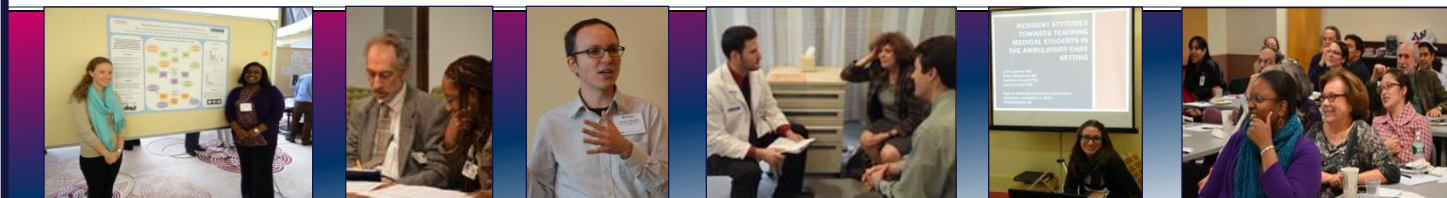


Teaching Tips

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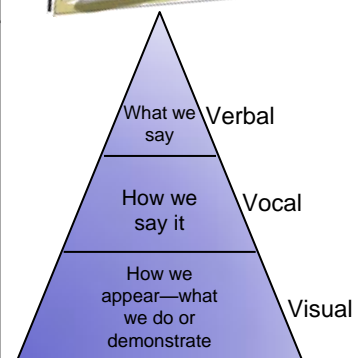
Teaching Learners to Talk to Patients About Sensitive Topics

Medical students need to learn to communicate with patients about sensitive issues (e.g. substance use, sexual practices, trauma, etc.) in order to establish appropriate diagnoses and formulate effective management plans. Research indicates that most of the discomfort around this questioning is related to inadequate preparation and instruction in communication techniques when discussing such issues. The following table provides some approaches to facilitate learners' improvement in their communication skills related to sensitive matters.

Take advantage of every opportunity to practice your communication skills so...you will have the gift, the style, the sharpness, the clarity and the emotion to affect other people.

Jim Rohn

Factors that affect gathering of sensitive history	Communication techniques (content & process skills)	Examples
Learner's anxiety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not understanding the causes for their own anxiety Not understanding the relevance of such sensitive questioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Normalizing the context ✓ Using transparency ✓ Asking permission ✓ Giving the option of not answering a question ✓ Addressing confidentiality concerns 	<p>"I ask all my patients about their sexual activity as part of gaining their medical history." (<i>normalizing</i>)</p> <p>"It can have an important impact on your overall health." (<i>transparency</i>)</p> <p>"Would it be okay if I asked you some questions about your sexual activities?" (<i>asking permission</i>)</p>
Patient's anxiety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embarrassment Fear of being judged Issues of confidentiality Not understanding the relevance of such questioning to their care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Assume the behavior is occurring (<i>gentle assumption</i>) ✓ Delay until you have established rapport (unless it is presenting illness) ✓ Use screening questions first to determine how much you need to ask 	<p>"How much alcohol do you drink?" (as opposed to: "Do you drink alcohol?")</p> <p>(<i>gentle assumption</i>)</p>
Question format <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wording Order Form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use language the patient can understand ✓ Ask for facts without judgment ✓ Use closed-ended questions (denial of the specific is difficult) ✓ Offer response choices ✓ Careful word choice ✓ Check for understanding ✓ Encourage questions 	<p>"Are you currently sexually active?"</p> <p>"How often would you say you use condoms?: Never, sometimes, always, or almost always" (<i>offering response choices</i>)</p> <p>"When was the last time you used cocaine?"</p> <p>(as opposed to: "Do you use street drugs?")</p> <p>(<i>specific, asking for facts, using close-ended questions</i>)</p>



References / Resources:

McBride R. Talking to Patients About Sensitive Topics: Communication and Screening Techniques for Increasing the Reliability of Patient Self-Report. MedEdPORTAL Publications; 2012. Available from: <https://www.mededportal.org/publication/9089> <http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/talking-your-older-patient/foreword>.

Kurtz SM. Doctor-patient communication: principles and practices. *Canadian Journal of Neurological Science*. 2002;29 Suppl 2:S23-9.