

How to Connect with a New Patient in Sixty Seconds or Less

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Make the most of this most important minute.

According to many studies, we all determine whether we like or have confidence in someone within seconds of the first meeting. Your patient's level of acceptance is often set with signals you send immediately upon entering the treatment or consultation room. This first sixty seconds with a new patient is your opportunity to lay the foundation for your successful relationship during the entire course of treatment.

Have you taken a critical look at what you say or do the first sixty seconds you are with a new patient? Too often we have our eyes looking into the patient chart as we quickly get into questions about the chief complaints without forming that all-so-important "personal bond." Although you are providing medical services, your comments, body language and demeanor those first sixty seconds set a generic stage common to all delivering a service to customers.

You are constantly confronting patients who are not like you, They all have different strengths and weaknesses. The mistake we make is that we too often think everyone thinks and reacts like us and they clearly do not. They present with a high degree of anxiety and a fear of the unknown even though they appear calm and in control. Most patients, due to their previous experiences and prejudices, come to our offices with a preconceived notion that the doctor may lack a degree of personal skills. This first sixty seconds is your golden opportunity to break through this barrier and gain this patient's trust by showing them that you are a caring human first and then a doctor!

First and foremost, when first speaking with patients focus on eye contact, the most fundamental skill taught but often not put into practice. If you have a hard time doing this, practice for a week, noticing the eye color of everyone you come in contact with. Eye contact is important throughout the entire patient visit, especially when you are presenting your treatment plan. Focus on controlling distractions that can cause your eyes to sway or head to turn, losing important eye contact.

Smiles Count

The universal language spoken in any land is a smile. It's amazing how barriers are broken down when you enter the treatment room with a simple smile and what can be called a "connecting comment" such as "How are you today? It's nice to have you in our office. I am Dr. Zhivago." This is so much more powerful than the canned, "Hi, I am Dr. Zhivago, what can I do for you today?"

You must believe you are on stage and everything is being evaluated in hyper speed leading to a bottom-line conclusion about your personality, body language, personal hygiene and caring. This is your opportunity to let your personality shine and break the stereotype of the "cold doctor." A funny thing happens when you smile: others do too.

Be a Good Listener

Some brief thoughts about the remainder of your patient visit beyond these first sixty seconds. Listening is one of the most important skills that will result in winning your patients' trust and earning you high marks. Listen to others and they will listen to you; you will get to know more with improved accuracy and you will gain their confidence. Letting others finish before you begin to speak delivers the message that you are sincerely listening. Acknowledge that you are actively listening with a small nod of your head, an occasional "yes" or "uh-um" and occasionally repeating back what your patient just told you in short form. Once again listen with your eyes by focusing on that all-so-important eye contact.

It is quite the challenge to change how we behave and react. But if there is just one thing you take from this article, spend a portion of that first sixty seconds to speak with your new patient as if you were meeting him/her at a party. Speak about anything other than why they are in your office, such as how they heard of the office, what they do for a living, what a beautiful day it is, something you have in common...just anything but their feet! I challenge you to focus on these first sixty seconds for the next two weeks and see how you spend this time with your patient. Have your assistants observe you and provide feedback. Getting on the same wavelength with your patients for those sixty seconds is a skill that any doctor or medical assistant can learn. Do not underestimate the power of this one quick minute.

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