



Editorial: Communication Style Makes a Difference

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Editorial

I recently had the experience of visiting a primary health care provider only to have questions posed and responses typed into a computer, without one look my way or even facial responses from the health care provider asking questions. One wonders if some day questions will be posed by the computer and answers typed into a computer by the patient, but it is my hope that nurses will not choose that communication style.

Nursing takes communication seriously. It is a required component in undergraduate curricula. We are known for our exceptional ability to listen, observe, and then carefully interpret and analyze information before moving forward. Given all the options for communication, it is time to select communication styles for their strengths and limitations, seeking the “best fit” for the communication context.

Communication via twitter, texting, and other styles of brief messaging is useful for factual information that is not confidential or that would be meaningless without the context for the message. Similarly, email is not confidential. It is most appropriately used to set appointments, meeting agendas, or for preliminary or superficial discussions. Although email communication is sometimes used for complicated and sensitive topics, there is potential for offending readers with words chosen too rapidly, especially when many of us have hundreds to answer every day. If forced to use email communication for controversial topics, avoid generalizations and begin with diplomatic language as opposed to abrupt language. Also, end the discussion with diplomatic, neutral language pointing the way to the “next step” in deliberations.

All types of written messages allow great flexibility for the writer as well as privacy for the reader. That is, the reader can set the written note aside when desired and can read only part of it at a time. The disadvantage of selecting a written note for communication is that communication is one-sided, meaning the writer is free to say anything, without opportunities for readers for seek clarification of answer questions. When considering a selection of email communication, always ask yourself if you would care to defend your email message in a courtroom if needed.

Telephone calls offer advantages for difficult and painful topics. For example, the sound of a calm voice can lower anxiety and reduce fear because it reminds the person on the other end of the telephone call that they are not alone. The length of the call can be individualized based upon what each party is wishing to share and their emotional state, which can be hear over the telephone. Importantly, telephone calls are confidential. In contrast, voice mail message are not confidential and should be used only when there is signed consent for other people who may be near that telephone to pick up the voice mail message.

Many of us are familiar with the comment, “It is not what you say, but how you say it that is important”. Before communicating with patients, clients, family members, and other health professionals, Select the communication style that best suits the nature of the communication content, the confidentiality of the content, the sensitivity of the content, and potential impact on the person receiving the communication.