

COVID-19 and Serious Illness Communication Skills

- Patients and families are likely to be anxious and worried as COVID-19 spreads in our region. Expect emotion when discussing difficult news and respond with empathy. The skills and language in this document can assist you in communicating with your patients and their families during this unprecedented time.

1. SKILL #1 - NURSE STATEMENTS

- Phrases that articulate empathy in response to emotion
- Builds rapport by aligning you and your patient/family and allows them to feel heard

Skill		Examples
N	Name	It sounds like you are <u>upset</u> * to hear this news. (*worried, angry, surprised, relieved)
U	Understand	This helps me understand why this news is so unsettling. I can't imagine how difficult it must be to hear this information.
R	Respect	I admire your strength and courage during these uncertain times.
S	Support	Our team will do everything that is in our power to support and care for you.
E	Explore	What could I do to help support you today?

2. SKILL #2 - WISH, WORRY, WONDER STATEMENTS

- Phrases that articulate empathy, share prognostic information, and ask permission to explore values with patients/families; can move a conversation forward

Skill	Examples	Rationale for use
WISH	-I wish we were able to test everybody for the virus. -I wish you were able to have more visitors. The risk of spreading the virus is too high right now. -I wish things were different.	Articulates empathy / aligns with patient
WORRY	-I worry that even if we tested you it wouldn't give us the information we need to help you get the best care. -I worry that if your loved one visited you they would be at risk of getting the virus. -I worry that your situation may change quickly and that we will need to be prepared for that.	Articulates empathy / shares prognostic information
WONDER	-I wonder if we can talk about how I can help you today? -I wonder if we can make a plan together for what to do if your situation changes (e.g., you develop a cough)?	Asks permission to move the conversation forward and plan

- Additional COVID-19-related communication skills are available for free at <https://www.vitaltalk.org/guides/covid-19-communication-skills/>



Last updated March 18th, 2020

Resources:

- Vitaltalk.org | A nonprofit social impact startup dedicated to making communication skills for serious illness part of every clinician's toolbox.
- Back, A., Arnold R., & Tulsy J. Mastering Comm. with Seriously Ill Patients – Balancing honesty with empathy and hope. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
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