Communication Strategies for the Challenging Clinical Interview and our Personal Hot Buttons

James T Hardee, MD
Joseph Cassara, MD
Hot Buttons

We all have them!
Can good communication with our patients help us uncover the “story” behind what we perceive as unreasonable behavior?
What are some of the difficult interactions you encounter in the exam room?
Consider...

How do your Hot Buttons present in the exam room?

How do you look, sound, and appear?
In the Exam Room:

We may feel threatened:
- Physically
- Our sense of achievement
- Our sense of competence and confidence

We may feel embarrassed:
- Our frailties
- Our mistakes
- Associations with past experiences
Where do these reactions come from?

Human beings are wired to see patterns as a survival tool.

Our perceptions are shaped by past experiences.

Law of closure
What are the costs if difficult interactions are unsuccessfully resolved?
Goal: Sustain the Dialogue

Two ways to end it too fast:

Be too confrontational

Be too avoidant
Approaches to Conflict: S.O.S

State the other person’s point of view:
• “Let me make sure I understand…”

Observe: What is the emotional core?:
• Validate & empathize: “I can see how…”

State your point of view:
• “My concern is that…” (include consequences, side effects, risks, etc)
Seek solutions: 3 escalated options

Offer a next step: “Would you be willing to consider…?"

Explore possibilities: “How do you think we can partner to find solutions?”

Cut to the chase: “Given our different perspectives, is there any way we can work together on this?”
Let’s Try it!

Care Actor
If the conflict can’t be resolved:

SET LIMITS FOR YOURSELF:

“What I can do is…”

“What I can’t do is…”
Things to remember:

Use active listening & avoid interrupting

Don’t answer emotions with facts & data

Empathy can be most powerful when it seems least intuitive
Things to remember:

Use “And…” instead of “But…”

“We” language builds partnership
An Approach to Conflict - In Summary:

• Notice your Hot Buttons

• Don’t get hooked

• Get curious, not furious

• Demonstrate empathy
Further reading

Conversation Repair. Frederic W. Platt Little, Brown Press

Field Guide to the Difficult Patient Interview. F W Platt LWW Press

Successful Management of Difficult Patient Encounters Patient Care August 2006. Kuritzky, L.

Making the Most of Challenging Patient Interviews Patient Care July 2004. Branch WT, Gordon GH.
Further reading


Watch the Tone of Your Voice. Medical Economics August 2016. Gladwell M.
