

# Put a Sock in It Already

Sometimes a Patient Just Wants Silence

A patient walks into your office; you greet him or her and ask how he or she is doing. The patient shares a few details and, in return, asks about you and your family. You proceed to excitedly share the highlights of your child's last sporting event. You become so involved in the telling of the story that you forget to watch for the patient's reaction—if he or she even has one. The next time you catch yourself in this type of one-sided conversation, stop and ask yourself, "Is my patient even interested?"

We might think that we know our patients by how well they seem to connect with us—how friendly they are or how easily we can converse. But it's possible that you may have a few patients who are not as interested in having a conversation as you think, and they are simply too polite to say so.

We've all been there: Sometimes we are just too tired or distracted for idle conversation. When I visit the hair salon, for example, I like to be quiet—the hair salon is one of the few places where I can go to relax and unwind. When I go the salon, I am not just buying a haircut, I am buying time to relax and appreciate a little inner solitude.

Thus, despite several years of relatively positive results with my hair stylist, I decided to switch to another establishment. My stylist had good skills and the salon was clean and up to date. In many ways, she and the salon had met my expectations. I even referred my husband to her and he remains a regular customer. So why did I make the switch? Because, two years earlier, my stylist hired a receptionist who would talk non-stop. If I did not engage or respond to her constant conversation, she would just talk more. I would politely nod or try to ignore her, but she wouldn't take the hint.

I'm sure that she was trying to serve me well—in her own way. In order to be friendly and make me feel appreciated as a customer, she felt as if she

needed to fill in the quiet moments with a clutter of words. Interestingly, her behavior became contagious. The longer she was employed at the salon, the more talkative and less attentive my stylist became with me, her client. I had to feign interest, and that made me feel uncomfortable. I realized that the act of constantly having to listen did not allow me to unwind in the way in which I craved. My loyalty to my stylist eventually evaporated.

My last visit with my stylist was at the end of a tiring, difficult day. All day prior to my appointment, I relished the idea of a relaxing, quiet visit. But, as soon as I walked in the door, my hopes were dashed. Just my luck, the receptionist happened to be in a particularly talkative mood—so much so that she followed me to the chair and continued talking while my stylist was cutting my hair. The quieter I became, the more they both tried to find a way to involve me in the conversation. I didn't want to be rude, but I finally asked, "Would you mind if I just closed my eyes? I've had a really tough day, and it would really help me relax." It was awkward, but it worked.

Let's learn from my experience. Don't create a situation in which your patient feels like it's his or her job to entertain you. Notice the signs of indifference. Are you doing most of the talking? Is your patient responding with one-word answers or not at all? Perhaps he or she just wants to enjoy a bit of quiet. If you get this impression, confirm it with your patient. For example, say, "We have found that some of our patients enjoy more conversation and information during their visit, while others prefer to just close their eyes and relax. What would make you more comfortable?" Make it easy for your patients to provide you with the feedback you need to help serve them better.

The next time that you're chatting with a patient, remember that the appointment is about the patient, not you. To truly connect with a patient, be a good listener. Be sure that it's your patient's voice that is heard the most, not your own. ♦



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