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## **Communication Techniques for Nursing Students**

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## **Communication Techniques for Nursing Students**

With the number of practicing registered nurses (RNs) declining following the COVID-19 pandemic, the cultivation of new nurses is essential. Nursing students are among those with the lowest status in the healthcare field. As unlicensed personnel, they are unable to provide care without supervision and are most often guests at the facility rather than employees themselves. This positioning in the healthcare hierarchy can lead to problems in communication and can negatively impact the nursing student's learning (Downer et al., 2022). It is estimated that communication is the root cause of medical errors 80% of the time (Janagama et al., 2020). It is important that student nurses practice and participate in healthy, effective communication to promote optimal patient care and safety. The communication skills built during nursing school will positively impact individuals ability to advocate for patients and themselves as new RNs. This literature review will examine techniques for students to positively impact communication with nursing preceptors in the clinical setting.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Importance**

Communication is the key to building a positive environment. Without effective communication skills, it is difficult to have an effective relationship with other human beings. Nursing students are one of many groups that have learned the importance of communication. When nursing students attend clinical it is their time to gain as much knowledge and experience as possible. A strained relationship between the student and the preceptor can make it difficult to glean valuable information. A study conducted by Reberio et al. (2021) examined the RN student nurse relationship and factors that influence this relationship. Multiple nurses and students were interviewed and several themes were discovered. One of the major themes identified was that

communication is a reciprocal process, meaning it is a two-way street. This idea is important to understand in order for students to be prepared with effective techniques to support communication with their preceptors.

As a student there are only so many clinical hours in the hospital. Lack of a trusting relationship with the preceptor can not only hinder the immediate time in the hospital, but also negatively impact communication in the future when the student becomes an RN. New nurses who reported not having a beneficial clinical experience are found to be lacking in their critical thinking skills (Otoo, 2016). The negative effects that this can have on new nurses shows the importance of communication. Something that seems simple, but is often difficult, is building a healthy relationship. Otoo (2016) explains how there has to be a trusting and nurturing relationship between a nursing student and their preceptor in order to foster a conducive learning environment. One of the independent variables in the study was the Student-Preceptor relationship. It stated that the relationship must be mutual to maintain open communication throughout the day.

### **The problem**

When communication between students and preceptors is strained, problems with self esteem and patient care may arise. A study conducted in 2003 gathered information from seven third year nursing students through unstructured qualitative interviews. These interviews suggested that nursing students often feel “small” or “lack of self esteem” following clinical practice days (Randle, 2003). This may be related to vertical violence. Vertical violence is hostile behavior from an individual in a position of power directed towards someone with less power, and is common in the RN student nurse relationship (Decker & Shellenbarger, 2012). However, this issue goes beyond snide comments in passing. Hostile work environments are known to

cause depression, anxiety and in some cases post traumatic stress disorder (Decker & Shellenbarger, 2012). This vertically violent behavior is seen by some as a rite of passage in nursing. It is essential that nursing leaders seek to prevent and quickly address vertical violence and that students understand this type of behavior is not acceptable. Without prompt intervention to change the culture of nursing, new nurses will be inducted into this negative culture (Randle, 2003).

In addition to vertical violence's effects on students, patient care may decline when the RN and student nurse are not communicating well. When students feel intimidated by their clinical preceptor, they are less likely to ask for help. They may not be comfortable sharing their lack of understanding or knowledge when this disclosure is met with disdain or annoyance by RNs (Downer et al., 2022). Similarly, student nurses must be sensitive to the ever increasing demands placed on staff nurses. According to a report by the Office of Health Policy (2022), many facilities have experienced staffing shortages and increased patient ratios following the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. While preceptorship is a wonderful opportunity to pass knowledge to the next generation of nurses, the extra responsibility can be stressful. Student nurses should hope to learn from and help preceptors. Students should rely on their clinical faculty rather than preceptors to address specific questions and concerns.

Poor communication can greatly affect a student's self esteem. In a phenomenological study, Keates (2022) investigated nursing student's experiences with assertive communication and found there to be a direct relationship between feelings of failure or guilt and the self esteem of nursing students. The results suggested that a student's self esteem is dependent on feelings of belonging on placement, and accurate constructive feedback from positive mentors. Without these components, students reported increased guilt and anxiety (Keates, 2022). Constant

feelings of guilt, anxiety, and low self esteem contribute to increased burnout in nursing students. A literature review conducted by Decker & Shellenbarger (2012), concluded that many students leave nursing school because they believe they lack any professional value.

### **Strategies for Effective Communication**

Assertive communication is essential to the development of healthy student nurse and RN relationships. Assertive communication is defined as “involv[ing] clear, honest statements about your beliefs, needs, and emotions” (Raypole, 2020 p. 1). When assertive communication is direct and respectful, trust can be built. “People are more likely to trust you when they know you’ll give open, direct answers” (Raypole, 2020 p. 2). As a student nurse and a preceptor, it is vital to be open and honest with each other in order to have a successful day. Using assertive communication can allow a trusting relationship to develop, which ultimately results in a positive outcome for both the student and their preceptor.

To accomplish assertive communication, student nurses should focus on being direct. First, the student must identify their feelings regarding a situation (Raypole, 2020). For example, if a student is asked to give medication without supervision, this may cause feelings of guilt and uncertainty. The recognition of these emotions will allow the student to identify their needs. Once needs are identified the individual practicing assertive communication can ask specifically for what they need. I statements should also be used in communication. This type of communication avoids making assumptions about the other person's feelings or thoughts (Raypole, 2020). For the before mentioned situation, an assertive student response might be,

Student: "I am sorry, I would love to help you but I do not feel comfortable giving medications under your login and without your supervision."

In this response the student identifies their emotions and needs regarding the situation. I statements and also used to ensure the communication is direct, respectful and honest.

An important piece to achieving effective communication with nursing preceptors is actively listening. Active listening, or the practice of “making a conscious effort to hear, understand, and retain information that’s being relayed to you”, helps the preceptor know the student is engaged in the learning (Colorado State University Global, 2021). Downer et al. (2022), found that actively listening can result in preceptors offering more opportunities to the student. For example, students who are active participants in their learning may receive more offers to watch or participate in patient procedures. These practices contribute to increasing communication and student confidence (Downer et al., 2022).

The clinical instructor can also play a vital role in the student’s development of effective communication skills. Debriefing after an uncomfortable situation can help the student identify what they did well and what areas need improvement (Downer et al., 2022). The clinical instructor should cultivate a comfortable environment where students feel free to share their experiences. This debriefing should take place immediately after the clinical experience to ensure that all events are fresh in the students minds. By discussing the event and the rationale behind actions, students can identify and develop methods for effective communication (Downer et al., 2022). In addition, this time would allow an opportunity for students to practice communication techniques with their peers. Practicing with peers provides a comfortable environment to explore open communication and get used to the challenges associated with assertiveness (Raypole, 2020).

Another important suggestion, that can enhance communication skills, is having a student follow the same nurse for their entire clinical (Williams et al., 2021). Following one preceptor for the total twelve weeks can build a trusting relationship. An effective and trusting relationship is linked to positive experiences (Otoo, 2016). Communication skills can be built on week after week with the same person, rather than the student having to start from scratch every week. This not only benefits the student, but the nurse as well. They become comfortable with the student and can help with the progression of learning over time. However, this suggestion is not realistic. It would be impossible to coordinate multiple schedules to facilitate pairing students and RNs for the duration of clinical.

## **Analysis**

Upon reflection of the literature review, it was concluded that this information should be readily accessible to students. Using the information gleaned during the review, a pamphlet was created (See Appendix A). This pamphlet serves the purpose of helping students effectively communicate with nursing preceptors at clinical. It includes examples of what to say, assertive communication techniques, how to start the day off right with a preceptor, and the benefits of effective communication. The pamphlet is a resource that can be brought to clinical and easily accessed by the student.

A pamphlet was chosen to convey the information in this literature review because it provides a comprehensive learning experience. Pamphlets are known to be effective educational materials. One study conducted on the effectiveness of educational pamphlets for teaching physicians procedural risks found that those who had received a pamphlet scored better on a five question test than those who did not (Bester et al., 2016). In addition, the pamphlet is easily accessible to students during their clinical day. It can be kept with clinical paperwork and viewed



at any time. The material is printed meaning that the student will not have to access online resources during their clinical time when phones and personal computers are prohibited. These factors make a pamphlet the ideal choice for conveying communication techniques to nursing students.

The “What do I Say” section of our pamphlet (See Appendix A), was designed to show examples of what nurses have said or asked students to do and how nursing students could respond. These examples were gathered from experiences of nursing students and clinical instructors. For example, one student reported that a preceptor asked him to chart that they had ambulated with a patient even though they had not. His assertive response was as follows,

" I don't feel comfortable with charting an activity I did not do, would you like me to find another student and walk with the patient" (C. Rosengarten, personal communication, April 2, 2023).

This response included many techniques for assertive communication. The student identified his feelings, communicated directly and respectfully using I statements and offered an alternative solution.

It was also important to include a section on assertive communication techniques and the benefits of using this style of communication. The definition of assertive communication was included on the pamphlet as well as bullet points as to why this style benefits nursing students. The goal of including the benefits is that nursing students will understand the importance of speaking up and being clear when communicating. Essential techniques for achieving this communication style include, identifying personal emotions, identifying needs, using “I”

statements, being direct but not aggressive, debriefing with the clinical instructor, and active listening.

The final section of this pamphlet recommends how students should start their clinical days. It is important as a student to find a preceptor. Students should introduce themselves and inform the preceptor how long they will be at the clinical site. The pamphlet also highlights the importance of students informing the preceptor what they can and cannot do in the clinical setting. This will hopefully eliminate any confusion that the preceptor may have and prevent potentially dangerous situations. As always it is important for a student to show the preceptor their willingness to learn. Finally, students should be knowledgeable about where their questions could be best addressed. For example, questions regarding curriculum or clinical assignments should be addressed to the clinical instructor, while questions related to the hospital or unit can be answered by the RN preceptor.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review examined techniques that positively impact the development of nursing student's assertive communication skills. Communication skills are beneficial for any human being to possess in life. Nursing students must utilize certain techniques to enhance learning opportunities, promote patient safety, and develop advocacy skills. Effective communication is achieved by being assertive, debriefing, and actively listening. These techniques contribute to student's self-esteem and improve critical thinking skills. Confidence and critical thinking ultimately allow for better communication and increase patient safety both while the student is attending clinical and when the student becomes a registered nurse.

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## Appendix A

### What Do I say?

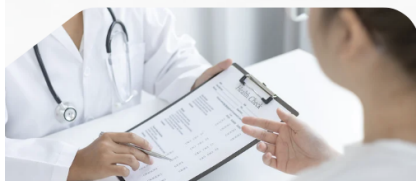
Here is a list of common difficult situations that you may encounter in clinical and appropriate responses for student nurses.

Nurse: "If I sign in can you just scan that med and give it for me?"

Student: "I am sorry, I would love to help you but I cannot give medications under your login and without supervision."

Nurse: "I didn't know I was going to have a student today."

Student: "I will be here every Thursday for the next 6 weeks. I hope to learn from you today and to help you with your assignment in any way I can."



“

It is estimated that miscommunication is the root cause of medical errors 80% of the time

(Janagama et al., 2020)



Erin Raby & Karlee Coddens

### Communication Techniques for Nursing Students

## Assertive Communication

Assertive communication is essential to the development of healthy student nurse and RN relationships. Assertive communication is defined as "involving clear, honest statements about your beliefs, needs, and emotions" (Raypole, 2020).

### Communication Techniques

- Identify personal emotions
  - Think about how the situation or what was said makes you feel
- Identify what you need
  - What is your end goal of the communication?
- Use "I" statements
  - Shifting the focus to yourself can prevent discomfort that stems from making assumptions about how the other person feels or thinks
- Be direct, not aggressive
  - Always use respectful and appropriate language. Attempt to use a nonjudgmental attitude.
- After a difficult situation debrief with your clinical instructor
  - This helps you learn the most from the event by receiving feedback from a trusted mentor
- Listen actively
  - This shows your preceptor you are engaged and ready to learn from them

(Decker & Shellenbarger, 2012; Downer et al., 2022; Raypole, 2020)

## The Introduction How to Start Your Day

- Introduce yourself and how long you will be there
- Communicate what you can and cannot do
- Be ready to listen to report
- Show willingness to learn

(Reberio et al. 2021)



### Importance

- Builds trusting relationships
- Allows for direct and effective communication
- Avoids difficult situations
- Develops better critical thinking skills
- Improves learning
- Increases confidence in clinical skills

(Otoo, 2016)

## What Do I Say?

Nurse: "What can you do while you are here today?"

Student: "I am in my second semester, I can participate in most patient care activities and give oral medications."

Nurse: "I know we did not have time to walk the patient, but can you chart that we did?"

Student: "I don't feel comfortable with charting an activity I did not do, would you like me to find another student and walk with the patient?"

(C. Rosengarten, personal communication, April 2, 2023).

