I’m watching you

Patients are very astute when it comes to determining how much you care about them and their treatment, says Mike Wanless, who says there are ways of learning how to show them your sympathy effectively.

Earlier in this series it was stated that patients assess us largely by how they perceive we care. In this article, we will look at how we can show that we care. You care for your patients as do all your fellow students, and although some of us are naturally better at showing it, it’s a skill that can be learned by anybody. So how can we show that we care?

When patients assess us they make value judgments about what we are like as a person. As human beings, we all do this all the time. Albert Mehrabian (1971) conducted research into how people decide if they like another person. This research is often misquoted, but has been successfully applied to other value judgments. When deciding if we like someone it is based on three communication channels, as we decide if we like the messages they convey to us.

We base approximately seven per cent of our judgment on the words the other person says. Thirty per cent is based on paralinguistics which is how we speak. This includes voice tone, whether our voice is monotonous or goes up and down, loudness, speed of speech, accent and the little words we say like ‘um’ and ‘ah’. The remaining 55 per cent is made up by body language, including facial expression. So how can we demonstrate that we care through body language?

Showing the signs

If you imagine that you are looking at yourself in a mirror, what sort of face are you pulling? Many are trained in how to use facial expressions appropriately to show that we care. Mike Wanless, who wrote this article, says there are ways of learning how to show that we care. Using facial expression appropriately is a strong indicator of caring. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who shows very little facial expression? If so, you may have sensed them as being cold or uncaring. It does not mean that they were uncaring, but that is how they looked. Maintaining good eye contact is also an indicator of caring. Just watch the expressions on their faces, and you will instantly know whether the person is genuinely interested in what you are saying.

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Gestures and body position

Gestures and body position also convey strong messages. A closed body position (with arms and/or legs crossed) can be read as indicating defensiveness. Simply uncrossing makes us seem more open to what the patient is saying. Open hand movements also indicate openness and genuineness. Just watch the hand movements of a politician. Many are trained in how to use their hands to show what a ‘genuine’ caring person they are.

In future articles, we will look at how we can show that we are listening to what patients tell us. We will also look at how we can respond verbally and nonverbally to show that we appreciate how they feel, which is a powerful tool in relaxing the nervous patient and developing rapport.

Reference