

Bridging the Gap between Patient and Physical Therapist: Emphasis on Good Communication Skills in Assessment and Rehabilitation to Improve the Overall Quality of Life

Aksh Chahal¹, Harbir Kaur Rao², Narinder Kaur Multani³

¹Professor, MM Institute of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation, ²Professor, Department of General Medicine, Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University) Ambala, Haryana, India, ³Professor, Department of Physiotherapy, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India

Abstract

A mode of interaction between two individuals is “Communication”, while the ability to perform an act with expertise is defined as “Skill”. Thus, communication when used with skills in healthcare practise to render positive results towards patient’s wellbeing, are categorised as “Good communication skills”. These skills form the basis for collecting vast and relevant information from the patient which is later put to tabulation and finally reaching the goal of implementation of evident therapeutic interventions. Good communication skills executed by Physical therapist help in developing effective treatment protocols followed with their timely modifications. The moment a patient steps in to consult a therapist, the first visual contact between the therapist and patient should impart confidence to the patient which ease to develop a positive attitude towards healthy living. In the last few decades, extensive research have been done on aspects of developing, implementation and analysing productive communication skills in different countries. With research focussing on different parameters as basis for good communication skills, the author in the present article would like to brush up with the existing and incorporate new skills to be used for effective communication between patients of any age groups and therapist.

Keywords: Skills, Communication, Patient, Doctor, Therapist.

Introduction

A mode of interaction between two individuals is termed “Communication”, while the ability to perform an act with expertise is defined as “Skill”. Thus, communication when used with skills in healthcare profession to render positive results towards patient’s wellbeing is summed as “Good communication skills”. These communication skills form the basis for collecting vast information from the patient which are put to tabulation and finally reach the goal of implementation of therapeutic treatment¹, in addition patient adherence

along with raised satisfaction level is also elevated. In rehabilitation and health science, good communication skills executed by Physical therapist² help in developing effective treatment strategies followed with its execution^{3, 4}. As communication between a health care professional and patient influence the after effect of treatment following consultation⁵, a therapist should develop and implement imperative communication skills as fundamental components in their assessment protocol and rehabilitation⁶. The moment a patient steps in for consultation, the first visual contact should impart positive vibes to the patient towards improvement of his overall health and thus, develop positive attitude towards a healthy life⁷. Simultaneously, a healthy and interactive verbal communication between the two will enhance the already developed confidence to another level of productive expectations which is created through the therapist’s clear, audible, bold and encouraging verbal commands⁸. Over the last few decades, vast research

Corresponding author:

Aksh Chahal

Professor, MM Institute of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation, Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University) Ambala, Haryana, India
E-mail: drakshchahal@gmail.com

have been done on various aspects like developing, implementation and analysing productive skills in communication via research performed in different countries. With these researches focussing on different parameters towards good communication, the author in the present article would like to discuss, less focussed strategies till date and elaborate on efficient and new communication skills in Physical therapy.

Skills for good communication:

1. Well mannerism
2. Clear speech
3. Gentle voice
4. Developing and maintaining positive attitude
5. Concise commands
6. Facial expressiveness
7. Confidence
8. Active listener
9. Maintaining eye contact
10. Encouraging orientation of self-posture and body language
11. Open minded
12. Respect to individual's privacy
13. Communication in patient's layman language
14. Able to create sense of humour

Significance of good communication skills by Physical therapist:

1. Therapist deal with infants and children.

A therapist should be polite in words, soft in handling and use easy understandable commands while treating infants and children^{9, 10}. Individuals in this age group firstly, are unaware of health issues he/she are suffering. Secondly, children might develop a negative mind set and low morale due to inefficiency in comparison to peer group. So, a therapist should take great care in dealing with infants and children.

2. Therapist treating adolescent and youths.

Dealing with this age group requires therapist to be

patient, soft in speech, active listener and communicative in patient's layman language. Therapist assessment with effective communication should go to the real depth of the problem being faced by the adolescent/youth. In one's life, adolescent stage is a critical stage as ideology and attitude developed during this stage governs thought patterns for rest of life. Adolescents and youth suffering from health issues make experience frustration and irritation due to incompetency with peer group which easily takes them on the path of depression¹². While handling, patients of this age group a continuous eye contact⁷ during conversation and treatment should be maintained to morally boost the patient's confidence. In addition, when handling these patients, extra comfort zone should be created to make them speak from within themselves, thus enabling them to develop positive attitude towards life and reduce the negative impact on psychological and physical health¹¹.

3. Therapist imparts health in middle aged and elderly population.

For a therapist to deal with this age group is a great challenge. Risk of falls and Osteoporosis^{13, 14, 15} are commonly seen and actively treated by various therapeutic interventions. While commencing to treat patients of this age group, therapist must already be inculcated with well mannerism¹, polite in commandment, slow in action and respectful as elderly not only suffer from physical ailments, but they are greatly embarrassed psychologically, personally and face family and social difficulties. A regular eye contact⁷ with elderly patients while communicating and treatment helps to develop faith in therapist which enhances cooperation from the patient while delivering in therapeutic interventions. As, in some cases where elderly population suffer from irreversible and progressively disorders like Alzheimer's diseases¹⁶, Dementia^{17, 18} and Cancer^{19, 20, 21, 22} etc. Along with physical therapy treatment, special concern is paid towards treating urinary incontinence pharmacologically and therapeutically²³ with the aim to develop positive attitude towards health and life and reduce the negative psychological impressions which continuously confront in brain of these patients^{11, 24, 25}.

4. Therapist deal with conditions which are progressive in nature.

On knowing that one self's is suffering from any disease which is progressive and has no or residual impactful remedial success in nature, it is quite reasonable

for an individual to create clouds of demoralised, negative attitude towards all domains of life (i.e. personal, family, workplace and peer group). So, while dealing with patients of these stature, a therapist should be soft and polite in communication, open minded and more focus put on initiating healthy conversations where the patient express their views, lacking, regrets etc. which impart information to the therapist to bring decline of negative thoughts. Based on the patient's conversation, immediate and future implementation along with upgrading of rehabilitation treatments is focussed².

5. Physical therapist work in reducing impact of irreversible disorders.

Certain orthopaedic and neurological disorders are irreversible in nature. These disorders engrave the sufferer's mind to a vast extent. While dealing with such patients, a therapist should make use of effective skills like active listening and open mindedness etc which in return will initiate developing confidence and ultimately, a positive attitude towards life. At times when a patient is depressed or low in mood, a humorous trick or joke is incorporated to reduce impact of negative psychological thoughts. At any moment of time, different aspects of patient wellbeing are being handled by a therapist, so it will be wise to say that a therapist plays multi-dimensional role in improving the overall well-being of the patient.

6. Physical therapist has longer duration of contact with patient (days/weeks/months/years).

Therapist duration of contact with his/her patient might last from a few hours to years, such as in stroke²⁶. Over the course of continued treatment, there develops a strong mental and emotional bonding between the two. This bonding is reflected in terms of discussing personal, family and social issues from the patient with the therapist. Patient suffering with short term impairment have different mind-set from patient suffering with long term disability. While treating patient with short term ailments the therapist should poses skills of active listening, direct questions, loud and clear transfer of command. Firstly, these patient should be are addressed towards maintenance of individuality and dignity. Gentle and soft speech to understand their mental turmoil and motivating the patient and reducing stress level by creating a joke/joyful humour as regular treatment should be performed at regular intervals as over the years patient tend to develop lack of mood

and no interest in future life¹¹. Facial expressions via a smile, head nodding and frowning of eyebrows from the therapist during therapy session are helpful in bringing short and long term improvements²⁷.

7. Therapist continuously motivate patient for active participation in all components of a society.

As the therapist perform its duties by motivating the patient in all stage of treatment (early, middle or late), in addition to the previously discussed, developing mental confidence and creating positive body language are of prior most importance. Communicating with the patient in their language enables them to be more expressive, based on which a therapist will modulate techniques to develop optimistic attitude towards present and future life.

8. Therapist makes efforts in maintaining compliance during therapeutic interventions.

To achieve this goal, a therapist should be innovative to create ideas and techniques of assessment and treating patient. New concepts and therapeutic interventions help in keeping the patient's interest towards treatment intact which help to uphold the compliance from the patient's. Along with regular implementation of new concepts, a enthusiastic conversation with patient's comfortable language keeps the patient actively indulged in therapeutic sessions. To boost patient's confidence, a eye to eye contact⁷ throughout the session is made along with focus on sitting and standing posture, are not overlooked as lack of interest and disinterest in life possibly develops a stooped posture which could be easily rectified manually if temporary in nature but, once permanent it leads to structural deformities of the spine which in return cause acute and latter chronic back pains which will have to be treated by different therapeutic exercises.^{28, 29, 30, 31, 32}

9. Therapist enumerates prevention and precaution to patients.

It is important role of therapist to enumerate all possible prevention and precautions mandate for a patient safety and security. These components are usually discussed in the concluding phase of treatment session. During the beginning and middle phase of treatment session the patient is usually energetic and centred towards the session. Secondly, conversation on prevention and precautions might hint the patient about conclusion of ongoing session. This might initiate

low interest in exercises being performed. Finally, while giving instructions, the therapist should be concise, clear and always maintain eye contact as it imparts confidence which ignites a positive feel in elimination of their current condition⁷.

10. Therapist play active role in educating patient's family/relative/friends.

The role of therapist is not confined only till treating the patient. It also includes educating the patient's family members and relatives^{11, 33} regarding the cause, progression and impact of the ongoing condition on patient's physiological, mental and physical status. In addition, prevention and precautions to be prioritised at home are also explained to the concerned parties. If possible, friends and peer group also should be rolled in for active participation for patient's faster psychological recovery which in return facilitate the physical revival and reduce the brunt of negative impressions from the brain.

Findings

A collective set of good communication skills are required in Physical therapist when working with patient of different age groups, patients with progressive/non progressive and reversible/non reversible conditions. In a nut shell, a Physical therapist should be well mannered, gentle speaking, confidant and active listener who always maintains an eye contact with his patient throughout session, encourage healthy conversation, respect to individuality and privacy.

Conclusion

Array of good communication skills when used by Physical therapist in assessing and rehabilitation, yield multi-dimensional benefits in the form of physical, physiological, and psychological wellbeing, hence improving the overall quality of life of their patient.

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