

PROMOTING RESPECT AND BUILDING TRUST

Communication Skills to Bridge Inequities in Healthcare






Clinicians tell us they want communication skills that foster respect and build trust with their patients who experience racism and discrimination in healthcare. In response, the VitalTalk community developed this toolbox based on evidence-based strategies, community feedback, and guidance from J.E.D.I (Justice-Equity-Diversity-Inclusion) experts.

This guide focuses on skills that communicate collaboration and respect for people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups because of their disproportionate experience of discrimination in healthcare. However, we hope these foundational skills can improve care for everyone.

We recognize that communication skills alone cannot fix deep rooted social injustices or structural racism. These skills serve as initial steps clinicians can take to actively listen to people's stories, validate their experiences, acknowledge harms, and affirm our commitment to action.

This work requires self-reflection, humility, discomfort, and bias exploration. Additional resources can be found [here](#).

FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

 AFFIRM	 ASK	 ACKNOWLEDGE	 APOLOGIZE	 ACT
<p>OVERARCHING SKILLS</p> <p>These skills are most successful with a genuine caring tone, eye contact and open body language. Responding to emotions that arise in these discussions is paramount. The NURSE (Name <u>U</u>nderstand <u>R</u>espect <u>S</u>upport <u>E</u>xplore) communication tool is a great resource.</p>				

AFFIRM respect and commitment

PRINCIPLE	WHAT YOU CAN SAY OR DO
<p>Proactively affirming respect and commitment can establish a foundation of trust.</p> <p>*People from marginalized racial/ethnic groups experience discrimination/bias early in encounters.</p>	<p>[AFFIRM] <i>I am committed to giving you the best care possible.</i></p>

ASK about their experience

PRINCIPLE	WHAT YOU CAN SAY OR DO
<p>Asking everyone about their healthcare experience, as part of routine, high-quality care, creates a culture of safety where people can share.</p>	<p>[NORMALIZE] <i>Because I want you to feel heard and respected, I ask all my patients what has, and has not, worked well in their care.</i></p>

ACKNOWLEDGE their experience

PRINCIPLE	WHAT YOU CAN SAY OR DO
<p>If concerns are shared, resist the urge to explain or defend the situation. This can erode trust and diminish their experience.</p>	<p>[SLOW DOWN-SELF REGULATE] Pause and process what has been shared. Shift the focus from your reaction to their emotional needs.</p>
<p>Reflecting back what you heard and validating the person's experience shows you've listened.</p>	<p>[RESPECT] <i>Thank you for sharing that with me.</i></p> <p>[ACKNOWLEDGE] <i>It sounds like we weren't listening to you. Did I get that right?</i></p> <p>[VALIDATE] <i>What happened to you is not okay.</i></p>
<p>[OPTIONAL] When appropriate, it can be powerful to explicitly acknowledge discrimination and racism exists.</p> <p>*Use this advanced skill with caution.</p>	<p>[NAME] <i>We know patients experience [racism/discrimination] in healthcare. It sounds like you are worried this affected your care.</i></p>

APOLOGIZE for harms

PRINCIPLE	WHAT YOU CAN SAY OR DO
Explicitly apologizing for harms, either by you or the system, shows you can take responsibility, are open to change.	<p>[APOLOGIZE-SYSTEM] <i>I am sorry you had that experience in the healthcare system.</i></p> <p>[APOLOGIZE-INDIVIDUAL] <i>I realize what I said/did was hurtful. I'm sorry [pause]. I want to do better in the future.</i></p> <p>[UNDERSTAND] <i>I can imagine it's hard to trust [me/us] after you've had this experience.</i></p>

Take ACTION

PRINCIPLE	WHAT YOU CAN SAY OR DO
Offering to partner shows you can be an advocate and ally.	[AFFIRM] <i>I'm committed to working together to make this right.</i>
Trusted partnerships may include people in their community outside of the medical team.	[PARTNER] <i>Some people want to include someone from their family, faith, or community. Would this be helpful?</i>
Creating a concrete action plan demonstrates your commitment to change. When brainstorming ideas, start with theirs first, then offer additional suggestions that find common ground.	[SUPPORT] <i>What can we do to support you and address your concerns? May I share some additional ideas?</i>
Following through with actions, in addition to our words, reinforces trusting partnerships.	[FOLLOW UP] <i>I will follow up in [time frame] to see how things are going with our plan.</i>

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