

An Evidence-Based Patient-Centered Communication Approach to Vaccine Hesitancy

The following evidence-based patient-centered communication approaches build trust, promote strong clinician-patient relationships, reduce resistance/hesitancy, and support engagement in self-care. This approach can be used in conjunction with the list of objections and answers Dr. Greg Adams has put together and is a framework for discussion about the COVID-19 vaccines.

Core Principles of Patient-Centered Communication

Motivational Interviewing (MI), emphasizes collaborative communication between providers and patients in addressing vaccine hesitancy. Medical practitioners might consider incorporating some basic MI techniques rather than the traditional directing strategies often used in the medical office environment, to decrease vaccine hesitancy and resolve ambivalence about COVID-19 vaccination. The main distinction between using MI (a guiding style) for vaccine hesitancy and the traditional directive approach is one of collaboration. It's the idea of "how can we work together to find the best decision?" This is opposed to "here's what you need to do..." In a situation like vaccine hesitancy when there is so much misinformation as well as strong opinions and beliefs, the use of directing styles may actually lead to more resistance and push-back between the provider and the patient. The MI approach may work best with the patient is ambivalent about the vaccine (on the fence about getting the vaccine).

Some of the main tenets of MI that can be applied with vaccine hesitancy are:

- Emphasize and support the patient's central role in decision making and managing their health
- Honor patient preferences for involvement in care and decision making
- Apply Motivational Interviewing (MI) Spirit: **PACE** -
 - Partnership - embrace a collaborative, non-coercive approach
 - Acceptance - respect autonomy, without judgement
 - Compassion - actively promote the patient's welfare, with empathy
 - Evoking - seek to understand; tap into the patient's motivation; ask more than tell

Key Patient-Centered Communication Strategies to Support Behavior Change

1. Ask permission to discuss the topic
2. Explore patient's understanding, beliefs, experience, and readiness
3. Support and affirm interest, benefits, past success

4. Share information (with permission) and check for understanding
5. Confirm next steps and plans, including follow-up

Application to COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance

1. Ask Permission to discuss COVID-19 vaccination

May I talk with you about the COVID-19 vaccine(s)?

- If yes, continue to Step 2.
- If no, you can say, I am committed to helping patients stay well and avoid getting the coronavirus. I am here to support you and can help you get a COVID-19 vaccine when you are ready.

2. Explore readiness and experience (ask ANY of the following questions):

- What do you know about the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine?
- What are you currently doing to protect yourself and your family against COVID-19? Flu?
- What is your understanding about YOUR risks of getting COVID-19?
- What have you been doing to help you (and your family, friends) avoid getting infected with the coronavirus?
- How important is it to you to avoid getting infected with the coronavirus? What makes it important? What would it take to make it even more important?
- I'm curious about what you have heard about the COVID-19 vaccine?
- What do you know about the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine?
- What are you most looking forward to when we all get through this?

Use reflections to respond/normalize/validate to what you hear and try to acknowledge they are not alone (being ambivalent) and affirm their strengths, values, and competencies...

- You have a really strong need to understand everything about the vaccine you can...
- You're feeling (overwhelmed, cautious, pretty good, afraid...) about...
- You're someone that likes to be careful and you're not sure if you can trust the vaccine.
- You're a critical thinker, like many you've heard a lot of negative things about it and want to make sure it is not harmful.
- You're not alone, especially when they first started many people, even experienced healthcare workers, weren't sure about it.
- There are lots of people who have similar concerns about the vaccine and I appreciate your willingness to take a minute to talk about what you are thinking.
- In the past, people (of color...without health insurance...) have been victimized and sometimes experimented on, so you want to be sure, it makes total sense.
- What I'm hearing you say is...

- So your biggest concern is...
- You have questions about...
- You need more information about...
- You really don't want to get this virus...
- A couple of things that you look forward to most when all this is over is...
- More complex reflections tune into the emotion the client is experiencing
- Getting the vaccine is pretty scary for you...

3. Support and Affirm ANY interest, benefits, current/past success

- I'm glad to hear that you have been taking steps to protect yourself and others from getting COVID-19.
 - It's good that you have chosen to be vaccinated for flu in the past.
 - It's great that you have taken other steps to stay healthy during this pandemic.
 - You've done really well with all the challenges about COVID.
 - You've given this a lot of thought and you're feeling a little pressured.
 - You take pride in making up your own mind and you like to stay well-informed.
- NOTE - If the patient spontaneously expresses readiness to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, move directly to Step 5.

4. Share Information (with permission) - Using the technique of EPE (Elicit-Provide-Elicit or Ask-Tell-Ask, etc.)

Ask permission to share information about COVID-19 vaccines

- May I share some information about the COVID-19 vaccines/safety of the COVID-19 vaccines/how COVID-19 might be important to everyone/issues surrounding using fetal cell lines, etc? (Elicit) This question can be used any time there is an "objection" to the vaccine.
- If yes, share information about the potential benefits of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine (supplement with handout, if available and needed):
- The risk of having a severe case of COVID-19 is greater for individuals with chronic conditions and those who are 65 or older.
- COVID-19 vaccines work. (Cite data from trials) - (Provide)
 - Reduced risk of getting infected with the coronavirus
 - Reduced risk of having complications, hospitalization, long-term effects
 - Reduced likelihood you will spread infection to others

Check back in with the patient using any of these phrases... (Elicit)

- What do you think about the information I just shared with you?
- I'd like to hear what you think about that information.
- Tell me your thoughts about what you just heard.

- I'm wondering what you think about that.
- I'm hoping that made sense. Please tell me your thoughts.

When applicable - I appreciate all you are already doing to both stay safe and protect others from getting infected with the coronavirus.(Affirmation)

Bottom Line: Vaccination with a COVID-19 vaccine, along with other methods (like wearing masks, physical distancing, washing hands) provides protection against getting or transmitting the virus.

5. Confirm Next Steps

- So what do you think you will do next?
- We've covered a lot of information. I'm wondering what you are thinking you might want to do next.
- Only you know what is best for you. I have ideas, but at the end of the day, it's really up to you.
- What do you think about getting the vaccine today (or when it can be arranged)?
 - If patient wants the vaccine, share information about options and arrange vaccination
- If patient declines vaccination, do ANY of the following:
 - It's really up to you in terms of what you do next. (supporting autonomy)
 - Ask if there is any other information they would like to receive.
 - Assure them we will provide vaccination later if now is not the right time. Let the patient know, "We are ready to help you when you are ready."
 - Let the patient know you will ask about their interest in vaccination at a subsequent visit, and the team will be happy to help them get it at any point.

Zingers...

- "I'm NEVER going to get that vaccine!"
- Possible Responses:
- Well, clearly you have thought a lot about the vaccine. (reflect and affirm)
- So, you probably don't want to spend a lot of time talking about the vaccine. May we discuss it for 2 minutes? (reflect/ask permission)
- Whether you get the vaccine or not is entirely up to you (support autonomy)
- I've heard this from other clients. Would you tell me some of your reasons for not wanting the vaccine right now? (affirm/normalize/compassionate curiosity)
- Others have told me this too. Can we spend a few minutes talking about being as safe as possible right now in relation to COVID-19 transmission? (affirm/normalize/ask permission)

Resist:

- The urge to telling them what to do or give advice without permission (see 4)
- Sharing your own personal situations/concerns (focus instead on what they're saying)

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Gagneur, A. (2018). Motivational interviewing: A promising tool to address vaccine hesitancy. Vaccine, 36(44), 6553-6555. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2017.10.049>

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Excellent overview article: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/vaccine-hesitancy-isnt-just-one-thing/618164/>