

Reducing The Stress Out Of That Visit To Your Doctor

from the American Counseling Association

A visit to the doctor can be a stressful and frustrating experience. While doctors may care as much as ever about their patients, today's ever-busier health care systems can make medical visits feel rushed and impersonal.

Other things can add to the stress. You're worried about your illness or symptoms, intimidated by those white coats, and perhaps confused by the medical jargon. Add in a rushed doctor with little time to offer counseling and reassurance to each patient and the stress level only increases.

Yet there are ways to minimize the stress while also helping insure that you're getting the most from that visit.

Start by being what professional counselors call "appropriately assertive." That means speaking clearly and directly while also being aware of both your and the other person's needs. You want to establish a climate of mutual respect that acknowledges the doctor's busy schedule as well as your needs to have your questions answered.

Prior to your doctor visit, write a list of your health questions, leaving space for the answers. Tell your doctor you have questions and ask if he'd like to answer them before or after the exam.

If your doctor is using medical jargon or technical terms, politely ask him or her to restate what's being said in simpler terms. Doctors don't mean to confuse, but common terms to them can be confusing to patients. Don't just listen, pretending to understand.

If a doctor visit makes you too nervous to really hear what's being said, ask a friend or family member to come along as a second set of ears. You might also ask the doctor for permission to record his answers.

Your goal is to get the information you need. Assertive communication means being politely proactive. Ask follow-up questions if something is unclear. If the doctor advises waiting to see what develops, ask for specifics on time and what type of developments to look for. At the end, summarize what you've heard about your diagnosis and possible treatments. Give the doctor a chance to correct anything you may have misinterpreted.

Having open communications between doctor and patient makes it easier for patients to voice their fears, anxieties and needs. When doctors and patients work as partners, communicating effectively with each other, the result is less stress and confusion, and the best care, for the patient.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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