



Communicating Optimal Caring in Telemedicine

As the world changes and embraces new technologies, the way people interact with health care providers and organizations is shifting toward much greater use of telemedicine. To achieve a person-centered patient experience and positive outcomes, we need to build skill sets that ensure the preservation of relationship-centered caring in telemedicine interactions. This simple guide provides a structure that embeds research-based communication skills throughout common telemedicine interactions. This applies to both video and voice-only interactions.

Quick Tips

- Look at the camera so the patient or family member will feel your eye contact. People often tend to look down at what is on their screen during video calls. Instead, look at the camera because that is what is going to appear on the screen for the patient. It will make it feel like you are looking right at them, which feels more connected and caring.
- Consider how you will take notes, and then explain this to the patient at the start of the visit so they understand that you will be taking notes. When entering information, explain: "Please give me a moment to jot this down while it's fresh in our minds." When the patient is discussing an emotional or critical issue, stop typing/writing and tune in completely.
- Make sure your physical space is clear of distractions, is private, and that the lighting is adequate and favorable on screen.
- Ensure your appearance is professional.
- Make sure that the environment which can be seen is clean, looks private, and has a professional appearance.

Note

The skills outlined in this resource are based upon The Language of Caring for Staff and The Language of Caring for Physicians programs.

For more information, contact Jill Golde at jgolde@languageofcaring.org or 314.571.9607

Example: Registration and Appointment Scheduling—typically involving a voice call, but adaptable to video interactions as well.

Step	Skill	Example
1. Prepare	⇒ Practice of Presence	Take a few moments to center yourself.
2. Create connection	⇒ Practice of Presence ⇒ Showing Caring Nonverbally	If on a voice call, it can be very helpful to use a mirror to monitor your own behaviors. Although others cannot see you, they can “hear” your nonverbal communication. This happens because when using a mirror people often smile more, use gestures, and behave in ways that are perceived as more caring by those listening to them!
3. Opening	⇒ Heart-Head-Heart ⇒ Showing Caring Nonverbally	<i>“Good morning, Mrs. Smith. I’m happy that you called in and I’m looking forward to helping you. I’m Marissa, and I will be setting up your appointment and getting you checked in this morning. I want this to be a smooth process and have you feeling better as soon as possible.”</i>
	⇒ Effective use of technology	<i>“Let’s make sure our equipment is working properly for you today. Can you hear me clearly?”</i> If using video conferencing, make sure they can see you and you can see them.
4. Elicit and note all concerns	⇒ Empathy, ⇒ Showing Caring Nonverbally ⇒ Acknowledging Feelings ⇒ Explaining Positive Intent	<i>“So, how can I help you today?”</i> Prompt as needed to gain understand the reason for the visit. Acknowledge feelings identified in what the person said, <i>“Oh, I’m sorry you’re not feeling well. It sounds like you’re <u>worried</u> because your <u>blood sugars have been coming back higher than normal lately</u> (restate concern). You also said that you’re feeling like <u>you may have caught a cold</u> (state any other issues identified). <i>“I certainly want you to feel better and to have your concerns addressed.”</i></i>

Example Continued: Registration and Appointment Scheduling

Step	Skill	Example
5. Clarify and communicate next steps	⇒ Summarize concerns and agree on reason for the visit	<i>"Is there anything else you need us to help you with at this time?"</i> <i>"OK. Then, I'd like to set up a visit between you and <u>Dr. Smith</u> to discuss your blood sugars and cold symptoms."</i>
	⇒ Use Explaining Positive Intent to communicate next steps	<i>"I'm setting up the soonest appointment for you. It will be a video conference call at 11:15 today. Does this time work for you?"</i> <i>"Great! Have you used our system before, or can I show you how it works so you know what to do?"</i>
6. Closing	Ensure understanding	<i>"Before we disconnect, I want to make sure you are feeling confident about being able to connect and use the system... (review steps)"</i> <i>"After your virtual visit, you will receive <u>a visit summary in your patient portal.</u>"</i> Provide instructions for follow-up information and billing. (Continued on next page)
	Use Gift of Appreciation to show you sincerely care	<i>"During the call, <u>Dr. Smith</u> will review with you any prescription needs you have and your choice of pharmacy."</i> <i>"What else can I do for you today?"</i> <i>"I'm glad I could help you today, and that you look to us for care. We want to keep you healthy and get to feeling better soon! Let me know if something comes up and you need anything. Take care."</i>

Example: Provider Visit—Made for video interactions but can be adapted as needed for voice only interactions.

Step	Skill	Example
1. Prepare	⇒ Mindfulness: Focus on the present moment	Take a few moments to center yourself. A good reminder is when you reach for the phone or computer mouse, and before initiating the visit, take a deep breath.
	⇒ Effective Openings: Prepare for the patient	Review patient chart.
2. Create connection	⇒ Mindfulness ⇒ Showing Caring Nonverbally	Check your nonverbal behaviors for caring. Even on voice-only calls others can hear whether you are present and listening. Look at yourself (on screen or in a mirror) and ask, “Do I look caring and present?”
3. Open	⇒ Effective Openings: Make the most of the first 6 seconds	Look straight into the camera. <i>“Hello, (patient name). I’m (your name and credentials/role). I’m really glad you called in today and I’m hoping to address your needs! Before we get started, do you have anyone with you today that who will be listening in or that you would like me to include in the visit?”</i> Welcome additional family members/others if applicable.
	⇒ Effective use of technology	<i>“Let’s make sure our equipment is working properly for you today. Can you hear/see me clearly?”</i> If using video conferencing, make sure they can see you and you can see them. Provide instructions for body/camera adjustment as needed.

Example Continued: Provider Visit

Step	Skill	Example
3. Open Continued	⇒ Effective Openings: Show knowledge of the patient.	<i>“I’ve reviewed your records and the information you provided when you called in. It sounds like you’re worried about your blood sugar values and also some problems with a cough, congestion, and watery eyes. Is this correct?” Acknowledge feelings: “It can be worrisome to have blood sugar values that vary from your usual numbers, and it sounds like you’re annoyed with the on-going cough, congestion, and watery eyes.”</i>
	⇒ Effective Openings: Elicit and note all concerns.	<i>Before going any further into those, is there anything else ⁽¹⁾?” Ask, “anything else ⁽¹⁾ ...” If patient starts telling a story about the complaint say, “Sorry to interrupt, before going further into that, is there anything else you’d like for this call to address?” “Anything else?”</i>
	⇒ Communicate Empathy	<i>Once the patient doesn’t have “anything else”, communicate empathy and support. “Well, it certainly sounds like you’re concerned and worried (acknowledge feelings you heard). Before we move on, let me commend you for tracking your blood sugars and the foods you’re eating. Good job!”</i>
	⇒ Effective Openings: Together, negotiate the visit agenda.	<i>“Thank you for all of this information. You’ve helped me to have a clear picture.” “We won’t be able to address all of these today. Which 2 or 3 are most important to you today and we’ll arrange a follow-up phone/virtual visit for the other items?” “Sounds good, so, we will develop a good strategy for managing your cold symptoms and then together come up with a plan for monitoring and getting your blood sugar values to stabilize. I want to help you feel better and get back to your normal self!”</i>
4. Address patient concerns and health needs	⇒ Engaging as Partners: Encourage patient to speak up.	<i>“When talking about your blood sugars you mentioned you keep a food diary. That is so helpful, and I appreciate the time and focus it takes to do that. It really shows me how committed you are to your own health.”</i>

Example Continued: Provider Visit

Step	Skill	Example
4. Continued Address patient concerns and health needs	⇒ Engaging as Partners: Find out patient's views/theories so you can build an effective plan.	<p><i>"I'd like to know a bit more about ____."</i></p> <p>After listening, ask clarifying questions.</p> <p><i>"Talk to me a little more about your diet. Can you tell me about your meals yesterday?"</i></p> <p>Nonjudgmentally ask further questions such as, <i>"and how did you feel 30-60 minutes after lunch? Have you noticed feeling like this in the past when you ate ____?"</i></p> <p><i>"Which food do you think might be elevating your blood sugars?"</i></p>
	⇒ Engaging as Partners: With permission: family	<p><i>"(Patient's Family Member's Name), anything else you'd like to add? Are there any concerns you have about (patient/relationship to family member) 's blood sugars?"</i></p> <p><i>"Sounds like you're worried, and that you'd like for her/him to be around for a good long while."</i></p>
	⇒ Effective Explanations: Ask	<p><i>"Tell me what you know about the relationship between insulin, food, and blood sugar."</i></p> <p>Listen.</p> <p><i>"Do you have other questions about insulin, food, blood sugars, and their relationships?"</i></p> <p><i>"Anything else?"</i></p>
	⇒ Effective Explanations: Tell	<p>Respond building upon what the patient knows/address gaps.</p> <p><i>"I want to help you feel better and make sure you have the information you need to manage your diabetes and keep your blood sugars regulated. This will make you feel better physically, and you'll be able to relax and not feel so worried"</i></p> <p><i>"Because of that low blood sugar episode, it sounds like you've already learned that you need to eat after you've taken insulin. That's absolutely correct— it can be confusing, but insulin lowers your blood sugar and if there isn't enough blood sugar there from eating it can make your blood sugar dangerously low."</i></p> <p>Continue to give medical advice specific to the patient's concerns.</p> <p><i>"So, yes, it's important to balance insulin with food."</i> Continue with the visit.</p>

Example Continued: Provider Visit

Step	Skill	Example
4. Continued Address patient concerns and health needs	⇒ Effective Explanations: Ask	<p><i>“How does that sound?”</i></p> <p><i>“What questions have come up for you?”</i></p> <p><i>“Just to make sure I explained it well, can you tell me how you’ll use the insulin going forward?”</i></p> <p>Use the teach-back technique as needed. Listen and address gaps, misunderstandings, and then check again.</p>
	⇒ Engaging as Partners: Talk “partnership”	<p><i>“We’re in this together. I want to make sure I understand you and you understand me.”</i></p>
	⇒ Engaging as Partners: Collaborate on goal setting.	<p><i>“So, you said that you will check your blood sugar every morning. Is this doable? Is 5 times a week more realistic?”</i></p> <p><i>“Now let’s talk about your cough, congestion, and watery eyes. I should add that sometimes when you are sick it can make your blood sugars a little off. So, it is good you are watching them closely...”</i></p> <p>Follow the same steps in 4. Addressing patient concerns and health needs addressing patients for this medical issue.</p>
5. Close	⇒ Effective Closing: Check understanding and comfort with next steps.	<p><i>“I want to make sure I did a good job explaining the plan to you. Tell me what you understand the next steps to be.”</i></p> <p>Make sure care plan for each concern is understood (in the example blood sugars and cough/congestion/watery eyes)</p>
	⇒ Effective Closing: Ensure closure	<p><i>“I want you to feel confident going forward. Do you have any questions about what we’ve talked about today before we end?”</i></p>

Example Continued: Provider Visit

Step	Skill	Example
5. Continued Close	Technology closure	<i>“Just a reminder, I will call your prescriptions into CVS on Market Street, and in about 30 minutes you will receive an email with my notes from our visit today. Should you need to recall anything we’ve talked about today, you can also access these notes on your patient portal account.”</i>
	⇒ Effective Closing: Make the last 6 seconds a positive memory	<i>“Thank you so much for calling in and sharing so openly with me. Please know that I am here for you and if needed can be reached by calling the office. Also, you may send me a message via the patient portal using the ‘Message My Provider’ tab. Also, I want you to know how much I appreciate how important your health is to you, and I’m glad that you’ve chosen me as your doctor. It’s nice working together to get you feeling healthier. To disconnect the call, click on the red “X” in the top left-hand corner of this window. Take care! Disconnect after the patient does.</i>

⁽¹⁾Mauksch, L.B., Hillenburg, L., & Robins, L. (2001). The establishing focus protocol: Training for collaborative agenda setting and time management in the medical interview. *Families, Systems & Health, 19, 2*, p. 147-157.

All other skills reference those found in: Leebov, W. & Rotering, C., (2012). *The language of caring for physicians*. Leebov Golde Group.