

Creating an Effective Relationship with Your Doctor

When you're healthy, you might see your doctor once or twice a year at most. You don't really have an ongoing relationship nor do you need one.

When you have a serious illness, though, you'll see your doctor much more frequently. Ideally, you'll work together as a team to decide on the best course of treatment for your condition, be in frequent contact, and share information readily with each other. Sometimes, the relationship between a doctor and a patient naturally develops into an effective partnership.

And, sometimes, you have to steer it in that direction.

The right doctor for you

Of course, you want your doctor to be the best. But an important question to answer soon after your diagnosis is, the best at *what*?

Part of that answer is 'the best at what he or she needs to do.' For a surgeon, that means great skill with a scalpel. For an oncologist, knowledge about the latest advances in treatment and available clinical trials are important assets. Even for your primary care doctor, the person who likely was involved in your diagnosis first and will continue to care for you long after you're in remission, you want good diagnostic skills.

For some people, that's enough. They can deal with whatever else comes up as long as their doctor is top-notch. It might not even matter to them if their doctor forgets their name—just as long as the surgery goes well.

For others, a good doctor also does other things, like listening well, taking the time to explain things thoroughly, expressing care and concern with words and actions, and the like. You are the only person who knows whether attributes like these are important to you. If they are, it's critical to be honest with yourself so you can find a doctor who will be the best at *everything* you need and want.

Once you know what you need and want from a doctor, you may find that your current primary care doctor fits the bill just fine. On the other hand, you may decide that you need to look around. How do you go about finding the best doctor for you?

You can ask friends and family. You can also ask other doctors, being specific about what else you're looking for, in addition to technical excellence. If you use an online site, such as RateMDs.com, make sure to thoroughly research your potential doctors offline, too.

When you're meeting potential doctors, be aware of the difference between confidence and excellence. A big ego is not the same thing as a great track record or a warm heart. And working with a doctor who has a big ego, even if he or she has stellar

recommendations, can be frustrating—or even risky. Sometimes, doctors with the largest egos are the least likely to admit mistakes. They can also be less inclined to seek out new information. No matter how confident your doctor is about his or her ability to treat you based on past experience, cancer treatment evolves so quickly that keeping abreast of emerging information is a critical quality for your doctor.

Creating an effective relationship

Your relationship with your doctor will be unlike any other. It's not an intimate friendship, even though you talk about deeply personal things. Your doctor's ability to help you depends on her maintaining enough emotional distance to see you objectively, but maintaining emotional distance doesn't mean that she has to be aloof or cool.

An effective doctor-patient relationship is most like a partnership. Both parties bring unique strengths to the table. Your doctor's education, training, dedication, and experience allow him or her to provide you with an invaluable perspective on your illness and treatment, simplify the confusing array of treatment options into an individualized plan for you, foresee and avert potential problems, and address any other health-related concerns that arise.

Your strengths include your knowledge about your needs and desires and your intimate awareness of the state of your health. By talking about your needs and desires with your doctor, you help craft a treatment plan that is responsive to them. You're also the one who'll be living with illness on a daily basis, and your experiences as you undergo diagnostic tests and treatment provide important information for your doctor.

Strengthening your relationship with your doctor

Invest in your relationship with your doctor, not just in what he or she can do for you. A stronger relationship makes you more effective partners, as well as increasing your mutual enjoyment of your interactions.

Help your doctor see you as a person, not just a patient. Speaking openly and honestly about your fears, concerns, and desires helps your doctor see how your diagnosis impacts you as an individual and helps create an atmosphere of transparency in your relationship. As you see more of each other, you may also find things that you share in common that can help deepen your relationship: children, sports, schools

Make it a point to see your doctor as a person, not just an automaton in a white coat. Just like the rest of us, doctors have tough days. If she looks weary, it's okay to ask why and offer some words of support.

When you appreciate something in particular about your doctor—how thoroughly she answers your questions, the way she never hurries through your exams—let her know.

The balance of power

No matter how much you invest in creating an effective relationship with your doctor, there remains a subtle imbalance of power. Your doctor is experienced and extremely knowledgeable, and it's a natural tendency to defer to his or her authority.

However, take an active approach to your office visits. What questions do you want to have answered? What issues must be addressed? Consider how much time you might need to meet all your objectives. Ask your doctor what time of day is best for a longer appointment and schedule two appointment slots for yourself. If, on the other hand, you're pressed for time, ask for the first appointment in the morning or the first one after the lunch break, when your doctor is most likely to be running on time. There are no guarantees because emergencies arise at all hours of the day and night, of course, but you decrease the odds that you'll cool your heels in the waiting room.

Present your goals for the visit with tact. "Here are some things I'd like to accomplish while I'm here today." Acknowledge the amount of time your doctor spends with you.

Trust your instincts. Your doctor knows far more than you do about caring for patients with cancer. However, only *you* know if something feels right to you. If it doesn't, ask questions until you get information that makes sense to you. And, if you still feel that your doctor is recommending something that just isn't right for you, tactfully voice your opinion. Do so without calling into question your doctor's expertise.

By investing in your relationship, you create a partnership that can withstand this kind of honesty. Getting the best possible care and care experience for yourself may mean that you'll make your doctor uncomfortable at some point. Be both willing to do so and careful not to do it in a way that undermines your relationship.

Your doctor is your greatest ally in your quest for health. Finding the right doctor, creating an effective relationship, investing in it, and becoming an empowered patient are all steps toward becoming part of a powerful partnership focused on restoring your health.

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