



# THE 5 QUESTIONS

**Retain patients, ensure their compliance, and build trust by answering these question like a rock star.**

Often as clinicians, we forget *why* our patients are in our clinics to see us. The reality is that they have a problem, and they believe coming to see you is going to help them overcome whatever limitations or pain they are experiencing. Keeping this in mind, as a clinician, you should make a genuine effort to communicate with your patients regarding their limitations, their expectations, and how *you* are the right person to help them. If you can answer these common questions with confidence, empathy, and understanding, you'll build patient trust, improve patient compliance with established plans of care, and drastically improve patient experience in your clinic:

## **1. What is going on with me? (Why am I in pain?)**

Given today's healthcare environment, it is not unusual for a patient to show up to your clinic without any real understanding of their situation or diagnosis. Doctors are pressed for time and often cannot take the time to adequately explain to a patient the many physiological, biological, or psycho-social factors that may be at play in their specific situation. These patients want answers. They want to understand what is causing their pain or limitations and they need someone who not only understands and is knowledgeable about the subject, but is able to effectively explain it in a way that is simple, concise, and easy to understand. Be sure that when you communicate with patients that you use words that calm and avoid words that may agitate or pathologize your patients. Your goal should be to effectively explain to your patients the underlying mechanisms of their pain or limitations while empowering them overcome them. What separates average clinicians from those that stand out is the ability to effectively communicate with those who they treat.



### 2. What do I need to do to help fix it?

Once you've clearly explained to your patients *what* is going on, then next logical question they will ask is what they can do to help themselves. It is important when answering this questions that clinicians do not fall into the common trap that entangles most: Patients do not want to be told what to do. They want to collaborate with their therapist to develop a plan to get them on the road to recovery. Far too often, clinicians run through a dull and dry list of: "This is what is wrong with you and this is what you need to do/not do." Part of effective communication is *listening*. You should make an effort to listen to your patients, understand their unique circumstances, and then collaboratively establish a plan of care with them. This becomes even more important if you are not the first clinician this individual has seen for this specific issue. How many clinicians simply told this person "Here are some exercises. Do these x times per day and don't do xyz."? Doing something as simple as listening to your patients and then working with them to establish an exercise program and activity modifications that will not only help them restore normal function but allow them to continue to do some of the things they find meaningful or important will set you and your clinic apart from the crowd.

### 3. How long is it going to take?

In this world of "I want it now", it is important for clinicians to be able to educate patients on realistic time frames for recovery and healing. Patients want to know how long it will take for them to feel better. To answer these questions, clinicians need to understand the biological and physiological processes of tissue healing as well as how comorbidities and other factors may affect the healing process. Again, it is important to take a look at the bio-psycho-social factors involved in your patients' situation in order to give them a realistic timeline for recovery. You want your patients to understand what processes take place during healing and how long those processes generally take. This is really where clinical expertise stands out from mediocrity. A clinician that really understands the healing process and factors that may affect it, will be able to confidently answer questions about time frame, comorbidities, and other patient factors and how they will affect the course of treatment. By effectively answering these questions, you will help your patients trust in the advice or recommendations you provide them during your treatment sessions.



### 4. What can you (the clinician) do for me?

They never teach you this in school, but even as clinicians, it is your job to sell your services to your patients. Whether you are an Occupational Therapist, Physical Therapist, or another discipline, you need to find a way to communicate the value you bring to the table. Today, more than ever, patients are beginning to shop around and look at healthcare services like they do any other good or service. Patients want to know that you are worth the price they will pay to see you. You as a clinician need to be able to show the benefits of the services you provide. For PT & OT, there is mounting evidence showing the cost-effectiveness of treatment and how the outcomes of treatment are equivalent to similar, more invasive, treatment options. Educate yourself on the literature and research pertaining to your particular field or specialty and then learn how to clearly communicate that to your patients. Consider communicating using emotional language. You do not provide healthcare services or treatment in your clinic. You provide a single, one-word emotional outcome to your patients. What is it? Is it relief (from pain, limitations, etc)? Is it freedom (to participate in their chosen activities)? What emotional impact does your clinic or practice provide your patients?

### 5. How much is this going to cost?

In today's complex healthcare consumer marketplace, patients are becoming more sensitive to costs for healthcare services. Rising premiums, deductibles, and co-pays leave patients in a position of having to budget, plan for, and even turn down services that may be cost-prohibitive. You should be upfront and honest with your patients about costs, but also about how long you think it will take them. How many visits should they budget for? Remember, your goal should *not* be to book as many visits that are authorized. Your goal should be to get your patients feeling better and in a position to take over for themselves; whether it be with a home exercise program, activity modifications, or adaptation. Mediocre clinics use up every authorized visit and rarely provide enough value to justify the expense. Show your patients that you are committed to getting them better, while also being considerate of their financial burden.

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