

Guide to Delivering Empathic Telehealth Visits

It goes without saying that when healthcare employees use skills and techniques to convey empathy, they build trust, lessen anxiety, and show others how much they care. Empathic communication also leads to better compliance, improved outcomes, and increased patient satisfaction.

As telehealth visits become a larger part of our “new normal,” conveying empathy virtually will be essential to creating meaningful interactions with patients. This guide provides specific techniques to deliver empathic telehealth visits.

1. Create an environment in which you and your patient are best positioned to be fully present.

- Become familiar with your technology. Have the ability to contact a nearby resource in case you need help.
- Conduct the visit in a private space. Patients will be more comfortable if they believe their privacy is being respected.
- Make sure your space is quiet. Close the door and/or eliminate other sources of noise.
- Mitigate interruptions by letting others know you are with patients. Post a sign on your door, silence your phone, or forward calls to voicemail. Close your email and other computer programs (unless they're needed for the patient visit).

FOR VIDEO APPOINTMENTS

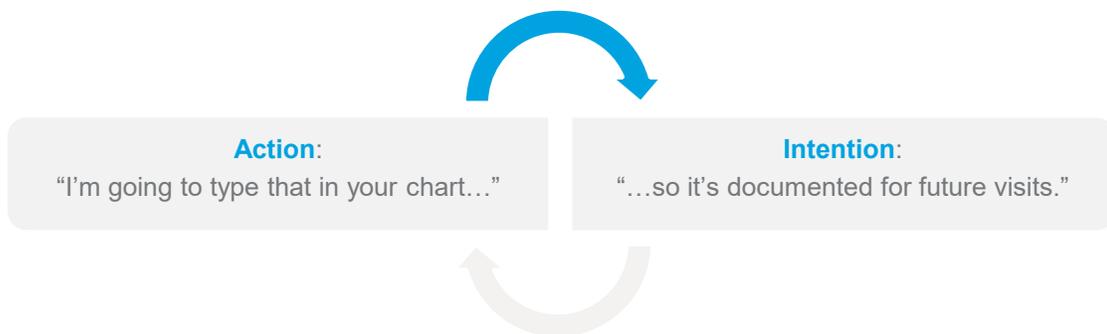
- Make sure your background is not distracting—remove any visible clutter.
- Dress professionally. Wearing the same attire or uniform you wear during an in-person visit sets a professional tone during a virtual visit. (Attire should also translate well on camera—e.g., it should not be too dark or reflective.)

Put the patient at ease so they can give their full attention to the visit, by:

- Introducing yourself to patients you don't know, by telling them your name and role.
- Beginning the visit with a question or comment to build rapport before launching into “business.” This demonstrates that you care about the patient as a person.
- Referencing the patient's medical record to show that you're prepared for the visit.
- Giving the patient the opportunity to open up by asking an open-ended question—e.g., “What are you most worried or concerned about today?”

2. Practice mindfulness by being fully present with the patient and listening.

- Before beginning the telehealth visit, adopt an empathic mindset by reflecting inwardly on what the patient might be going through.
- Mitigate distractions by taking a deep breath or stretching. This can help you clear your mind, preparing you to give the patient your full attention.
- Position your camera so the patient can see your face. Your upper body should fill most of the camera frame. If a family member is present for the call, make sure both they and the patient are in the camera frame, so you can see and respond to both.
- Don't multi-task during a telehealth visit.
- If you need to use a device other than the telehealth equipment, let the patient know. Use statements to match your actions and your intentions, for instance:



Pay attention to your body language:

- **Make eye contact by looking into the camera. Don't look at yourself on the screen. Place your camera at eye-level, so it'll be easy for you to maintain comfortable eye contact.**
- Sit up straight, square your shoulders, and plant your feet on the floor.
- Use gestures, such as nods, to show that you're listening.

Pay attention to your facial expressions and tone of voice:

- Avoid eye-rolling, smirking, and other expressions that convey judgement or disinterest.
- Speak clearly.
- Use the appropriate strength and speed of voice. Remember, it can be easy to speak too loudly during a call.
- Be aware of the words you emphasize.
- Match your tone with the appropriate emotions.

Don't interrupt. Just listen.

- If possible, place yourself on Mute while the patient is talking, to avoid interrupting them.
- Refocus your attention, if needed.
- If you are conducting the visit by phone without video, give patients the same considerations you would if you were communicating by video or in person.

STUDIES SHOW

Studies show¹ that providers interrupt patients after an average time of 11 seconds—while on average, patients will talk for 90 seconds if not interrupted.



Provider



Patient

3. Listen for facts and emotions. Seek to identify the patient’s emotions and connect with those emotions in a personal way.

- As you are listening to the person, ask yourself, “How is this person feeling?”
 - Patients may be emotional about many things in addition to their health and well-being. Open your heart and mind to everything a patient may be feeling.
- Identify the person’s emotions.
- Validate the person’s emotions by recalling a time you felt the same way.
- Pay attention to the person’s body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice:
 - Remember, body language tells you more about how a person is feeling than their words do.
 - If necessary, stop the conversation to ask probing questions. Use teach-back techniques to ensure understanding.
 - Offer words of assurance and encouragement.

4. Express empathy: Say out loud how you believe the person is feeling, or what they are going through.

- You can make your empathy known through empathic statements, which make the patient feel heard and understood. These statements lessen anxieties and show that you really care. A few examples of empathic statements are:
 - “You seem worried.”
 - “I can imagine how afraid you must be right now.”
 - “That must be hard.”

SCENARIO:

During a virtual visit, you observe the patient suddenly lean back, raise one eyebrow, and give an uncertain look.

Communication

Skill/technique	Statement	Impact
Empathize	“You seem worried.”	The empathic statement indicates that the provider is really listening and paying attention. He/she senses something is wrong.
Own misunderstandings or communication breakdowns	“What can I repeat for you? I want to be sure you understand.”	Taking ownership of the interaction—rather than accusing the patient of not understanding—demonstrates the provider’s accountability for a successful interaction.
Teach-back	“How will you explain what we’ve been saying to your daughter?”	Using teach-back gives the provider the opportunity to check the patient’s understanding and reiterate key points.
Validate	“Don’t worry. Others find this confusing, too.”	A validating statement lets the patient know that they’re not alone.
Assure	“You’ll be fine. We’re in this together.”	This type of statement reassures the patient and reinforces the patient/provider partnership.

5. Use service-recovery skills.

- Service recovery is how an organization resolves customer dissatisfaction. Often associated with a service failure, service recovery also applies to addressing patients' disappointments and unmet expectations, and (because the healthcare experience is often extremely emotional) attending to their emotions.
- When done effectively, service recovery de-escalates situations, illustrates the provider's understanding of what the patient is experiencing, and shows the provider's willingness to make the situation better.

EFFECTIVE SERVICE RECOVERY SKILLS:

- Listen attentively, for both facts and emotions. Display positive body language.
- Empathize by saying out loud how you believe the person is feeling.
- Apologize without placing blame or making excuses.
- Own the situation and do what you can to help.
- Thank the person.
- Conclude by asking the person, "Is there anything else I can do?"

SCENARIO:

At the end of the virtual visit, the patient says, "Okay, I'll get the medicine. I hope the side effects aren't too bad."

Ideal response

Service-recovery skill	Action or statement	Impact
Listen	Listen attentively for facts and emotions and display positive body language.	This shows respect for the person and interest in what they're saying.
Empathize	"You seem concerned."	This illustrates your understanding of how the person is feeling and what they are experiencing.

→	→	→
Apologize	“I’m sorry.”	This offers the person another gift of empathy.
→	→	→
Own	“I’ll call you in two days to see how you’re doing. If the side effects are too bad, I’ll change the dose.”	This lets the person know what can be done to resolve the concern. Using the pronoun, “I” instead of “We” demonstrates your personal level of ownership for the solution.
→	→	→
Thanks	“Thanks for saying something. I wouldn’t want your concern to prevent you from taking the meds.”	This shows that the patient’s concerns are welcomed and appreciated.
→	→	→
Conclude	“Is there anything else I can do for you?”	This opens the door for you to assist the patient in other ways.
→	→	→

NRC Health Improvement Advisors are available to answer your questions and present this material via webinar to large groups.

¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/doctor-patient-visits-1035514>
<https://www.bmj.com/content/328/7438/501>