

Improve the Patient Experience with Key Words for Wait-Lifting

Adjust expectations immediately

On the phone. Suggest the length of time the visit will take so the customers can make arrangements. "I can give you an appointment time of _____. Because we can't predict exactly what help other patients will need before your visit, please expect to be here at least _____ hours so you won't get anxious if you do need to wait."

Upon arrival.

Offer the following to help patients accept the wait better:

- **Good intention:** "I want you to know how things work, so you'll know what to expect."
- **Facts:** "We take care of a lot of people. While we try to schedule so you don't have to wait, it's very hard. Sometimes patients need more time than we predicted."
- **A good reason in the interest of the patient:** "We want to give every one of our patients all the help and information they came for, without rushing. Sometimes that causes others to wait."
- **Estimated wait:** "Today, my estimate is that you might be waiting about _____ minutes." Don't use the word "guess."
- **Thank you:** "I really appreciate your patience and understanding."
- **Offer comforts:** "Would you like _____ to help make the time go faster?"
- **Thank you:** "Again, thank you so much for your patience."

Update the patient and family about delays:

- **Approach frequently:** At least every 10 minutes, a staff person should walk over to the patient and family and give an update on the delay, making them know they are not forgotten.
- **Provide a personal apology:** "Jimmy, Mrs. Hunt, I'm so sorry we haven't been able to take you yet. I want you to know we haven't forgotten about you!"

- **Explain the delay with the customer's perspective in mind:** For instance, "Other patients are taking longer than we predicted, and our care team wants to give each person the time needed."
- **Estimate the length of their wait:** "My estimate is that it will take another _____ or _____ minutes before we're ready for you. If that changes, I'll stop back and let you know." Don't say, "We have no idea when we'll be ready for you." Or "I can't promise anything." Or "Who knows when they'll be ready. It's a zoo today."
- **Empathize:** "I know it can be hard to wait when you aren't feeling well or you have other things you want to do."
- **Offer relief:** For instance, "Can I get you a magazine, or would you like some water?"
- **Apologize again and thank them:** Thank both the patient and family for their patience. "I'll be sure to let you know if there's a change."

Six Scripts for Dealing with Long Waits

Here are sample scripts for six situations in which delays play havoc with patient and family satisfaction. These situations also create embarrassment and stress for staff. Notice that best practices in dealing with unavoidable delays include empathy, stating your positive intent, explaining, making realistic time estimates, giving options and expressing thanks.

1. Waiting for discharge

- **Tell the patient and family about the many steps in the discharge process.** If most patients experience time lags between one step in the process and another, alert them in advance that this might occur, and tell them the reason in a positive way.
- **Provide people with realistic time estimates and an overview of the process.** In your explanations, it is better to over-estimate how long the process will take and surprise them with a shorter time.
- **Stop back and give the patient an update at least hourly.** See if you can help him or her prepare or find a way to keep busy during the waiting time.

Words That Work

- Empathy: “I realize you’re looking forward to going home tomorrow and I can see that you’re happy you’re well enough to go.”
- Positive intent: “I want to prepare you for the discharge process so you’ll know what you can expect tomorrow.”
- Explanation:
 - “I’m sorry to say that it takes several hours to do everything necessary before you can leave the building.”
 - “First, we’ll wait for your doctor to check on you here one last time and sign the discharge order.”

- “Since your doctor will be seeing many patients tomorrow, we can’t tell you for sure how long he’ll be with other patients before he gets to you.”
- “Your doctor or nurse will (once again) go over with you the instructions, telling you things you and/or your family need to do at home to take care of you.”
- “Your nurse or patient care associate will then help you get yourself and your things ready. This can take more than an hour.”
- “Then, after all the right papers are signed and you’re ready to go, we arrange for an escort to help you to the door and ensure you have a ride home. Because we have many patients moving in and out, it can take a while before we can dedicate an escort to give you a safe ride to your car.”
- **Realistic time estimate:** “You can see that there are several steps in the discharge process. That’s why it will take up to _____ hours before you can actually leave.”
- **Thanks:** “I really appreciate your patience.”

2. Waiting for pain medications

- **Apology:** “I’m so sorry you’ve been waiting for your pain medication.”
- **Explanation:** “We had an emergency with another patient and got delayed.”
- **Empathy:** “I realize it’s awful to be in pain and not be able to relieve it.”
- **Positive intent:** “I’m going to get your medication--right away. I want you to be much more comfortable as soon as possible.”

3. Waiting for the doctor

- **Apology:** “Mr./Ms. Jones, I’m so sorry about the wait. I realize you’ve been waiting _____ minutes already since the time we gave you for your appointment.”
- **Explanation:** Give the cause of the delay. “The doctor is delayed” or “The doctor is taking longer than expected with another patient in need” or “The equipment we need for your test is being used by another physician.”
- **Positive intent:** “I can assure you that you will receive the doctor’s complete attention once she is ready to serve you.”
- **Realistic time estimate:** “I think it will be as much as _____ minutes/hours before the doctor is ready. Would you like to use the phone to call and alert someone that you’ll be longer than expected? Or can I get you something to make you more comfortable while you wait--a magazine, a cup of coffee?”
- **Options:** “If waiting for this appointment is making you late for something else, would you prefer to schedule an appointment for another time?”

4. Waiting for diagnosis or care in the emergency department

(Did you know that care time is at most 19 percent of total time in the ED? That means wait time is 81 percent of total time!)

- Make sure the patient and their friends and family have a written explanation of the care process, so that they're aware of the time-consuming things that happen in the ED. Help them understand how long they are likely to wait.
- Explain duration. For instance, "I want you to know that you're likely to be here for at least (minutes/hours). I realize this may seem like a long time, but I'd like you to know why it will take so long."
- Explain the reasons, such as:
 - "The doctor may be waiting for test results before being able to treat you."
 - "We need to see people with life-threatening problems before those who do not appear to have such serious problems."
 - "Because this is a teaching hospital, we have our physicians and residents talk with you and examine you... which also takes time."
 - "There may be waits because of the tests the doctor thinks you need."
- Ask what you can do to make their wait more comfortable. Show people where the phones and snack or drink machines are.
Give them the name of the person to ask for if they want an update before a caregiver is scheduled to give them one.

5. Waiting for an inpatient room from ED or admission

- **Anticipation:** Tell them what they can expect and why: "The process here has many steps in it. For that reason, it usually takes about (time estimate) before we can locate the right type of room for you and prepare that room by cleaning it and getting the right supplies delivered."
- **Apology and empathy:** "(Name), I'm sorry you're still waiting. I realize it's so frustrating waiting when you came here to see a doctor."
- **Positive intent:** "I assure you I will do all I can to take you in quickly."
- **Explanation:** "The problem is, for reasons I hope you'll understand, our policy is to take people in life-threatening situations ahead of people with problems that can wait. Also, because this is a teaching hospital, we have our physicians and residents talk with you and examine you...which also takes time. There may also be waits because of the tests the doctor thinks you need. Then we need to find an appropriate room and go through the process of preparing it for you. This too can take a while as the patient in there before you might take more time than we expected to vacate the room."

- **Realistic time estimate:** “So, getting you to a room is going to take a while — as long as _____.”
- **Options:** “In the meantime, what can I do to make you more comfortable? Would you like to use a phone, read a magazine, or have some water?”
- **Thanks:** “Thanks for staying and waiting. I really appreciate your understanding.”

6. Waiting for a meal that's been delayed

- **Empathy:** “I’m so sorry that you haven’t received your meal. I can imagine you’re hungry.”
- **Explanation:** “Apparently, when the delivery was made, you were out of the room.”
- **Positive intent:** “I want to get a meal for you quickly.”
- **Actions:** “I will immediately call food services to provide it. And I’ll stop back in to let you know about how long it will take.”
- **Thanks:** “I appreciate your patience.”