

Opens consultation and explores problem

Green – Greets the patient and introduces him/herself

Red – Offers no or cursory greeting and/or introduction

Green – Encourages the patient, and clarifies his/her presenting problem

Red – Does not encourage the patient and does not discover why the patient has attended

About this task

The opening of the consultation is important and sets the scene for the whole consultation. Therefore, if it goes badly, subsequent tasks can be adversely affected.

A good opening contributes to the establishment of rapport and helps the patient to feel relaxed. The following behaviours will all contribute to a successful opening:

- The trainee introduces himself/herself to the patient
- The trainee demonstrates that they are interested in the patient
- The trainee non-verbal body language encourages the patient and helps them to feel comfortable and relaxed.
- The trainee begins with an open question (for example, “*How can I help today?*”)
- The trainee does not interrupt the patient until they have said what they need to say
- The trainee stays focussed on the patient with good eye contact and positive non-verbal body language

Audio consultations

The above is particularly true for **audio** consultation. In audio consultations, there are ample opportunities to go wrong at the outset - so it is important to speak clearly and slowly, introduce yourself, make sure you are dealing with the right patient, and use modulations in voice to ensure that the patient remains engaged. Another useful strategy is to check that the patient is in a situation where he/she can talk freely - so with the right degree of privacy, and with no competing responsibilities.

Educational Activities

Activity 1: Record several videos and watch just the first minute of each consultation with your trainer. For each consultation check (and discuss):

- Have I introduced myself (if necessary)?
- Have I discovered the name of the patient (if necessary)?
- Am I completely focussed on the patient in front of me? If not, why not?
- Do I seem interested in the patient?
- Do I let the patient speak or do I interrupt frequently?
- Have I started with an open question?

Activity 2: Compare the first minute of your consultation with the first minute of one of your trainer's consultations. Do you observe/hear things that your trainer does differently that you can learn from?

Activity 3: Watch other consulters in the practice to identify different styles and to help you decide which approach suits your personal style.

Audio consultations

Listen to four or five of your audio consultations, focusing on the first minute of each consultation. For each audio consultation ask yourself:

- Do I introduce myself clearly to the patient?
- Do I check that I am speaking to the right patient?
- Do I check that the patient is able to speak freely?
- Do I allow the patient to finish speaking?
- Is my first question to the patient an open question?

Reflective Exercises

Exercise 1: Think about and discuss with your trainer different methods of greeting the patient. Which method do you think works best for you and achieves the aim of helping the patient to feel comfortable and relaxed?

Exercise 2: Think about your own non-verbal demeanour. Remember that patients will make the same rapid evaluation of you in the opening 30 seconds as you do about them and 70% of this evaluation is from your non-verbal communication.

In the case of audio consultations your non-verbal behaviour relates to the tone of your voice. For example, you might adopt a friendly tone and this can be enhanced by the words you use in the opening greeting.

Exercise 3: Think about your 'resting' face and posture. Do you look overly serious and might benefit from smiling more? Think of your own physical presence. Do you need to consider any potential barriers such as a closed body posture or getting too close to the patient? What about the tone of your voice?

Exercise 4: Consider the option of shaking hands with a patient. This may work for you if you have a very reserved approach, as it is impossible not to smile at someone when you are offering your hand. The important point is to find an approach which works for you to achieve the above aim and which you can adapt - depending on the patient's age, gender and cultural background.

Related interpersonal skills

Practicing and developing the following interpersonal skills will allow the task of '*Opens consultation and explores problems*' to be achieved more effectively:

- Generates rapport
- Uses open questions appropriately
- Clarifies and explores cues offered
- Listens and shows curiosity

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