

Empathy: Talking to Patients About Substance Use Disorder



As a clinician, you have an important role in screening patients for a substance use disorder and connecting them to treatment resources. You may also be actively involved in their treatment.



The following tips can be helpful for engaging patients and reducing their anxiety when discussing substance use and substance use disorders:

▶ **Ask permission and provide options.**

- Start by letting your patient know that you care about them and want to partner with them in getting them the help they need. For example, ***“Would it be alright with you if I asked you some questions about your substance use?”***
- Reassure your patient that they have the option of not answering a question if it makes them feel uncomfortable.

▶ **Normalize the conversation.**

Tell your patient that any discomfort they are feeling is normal and that they are not alone. For example, ***“This is not unusual. Many patients find it hard to talk about their substance use...”*** or, ***“Talking about substance use can be uncomfortable.”***

▶ **Be transparent.**

Explain that it is important for you to ask specific questions because it is relevant to their treatment. For example, ***“I need to ask you some very specific questions about your use of [XXX] in order to better understand how we can improve your health and keep you safe.”***

▶ **Work collaboratively with patients.**

Remind your patient that recovery is possible and that paths to recovery look different for different people.



Conversation Starter: Empathy

► Address confidentiality concerns honestly.

- Let patients know that you respect their confidentiality and will comply with the protections provided by law for patients. Patients have a right to be informed about any limitations you may face in providing 100% confidentiality.
- Tell patients of any limited instances when you are required by law to report a threat of harm to self or others.

I want you to know that everything you share with me and that we discuss today is confidential. However, there are some limited exceptions under the [state] law I want to make sure you know and understand. [State's] policy that requires me to report threats of harm to self or others.



► Establish trust and show empathy.

- Actively listen to your patient.
- Engage with your patient in a non-judgmental way.
- Treat your patient with respect and address their substance use disorder as the medical disease that it is.
- Help your patient understand that you intend to connect them to the comprehensive treatment services they might need, and that recovery is possible.



Want to Know More?

Check out the following links for more information on related topics.

- [Medications for substance use disorders](#)
- [Information and resources on drug overdose prevention](#)