

# Doctor-Patient Communication – The Importance of Your “Story” and How You Tell It

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*"What brings you here today, Mr. Jones?" the doctor asks as he enters the room for Mr. Jones' doctor appointment.*

*"Well, Doctor I started feeling kind of crummy a while back and I've noticed that the feeling comes and goes," Mr. Jones responds in a half-hearted manner.*

*"How long ago did it start, and can you describe your symptoms to me?"*

*"I'm not quite sure when it started. It may have been a month ... or so ago... maybe longer. I can't remember exactly how I felt then and I'm not sure if the symptoms I am having now are the same. I just know I don't feel very good."*

*The probing continues...*

*By this time, Mr. Jones has gotten a bit of a whine in his voice. The doctor sees by his watch that he has already used half of Mr. Jones appointment time and thinks, "I will have to work hard to pull information from this patient. I am behind and it is going to be very difficult to get to a diagnosis. This is frustrating! Why can't people be better prepared and more specific? Why don't they know enough to be able to tell me clearly what has been happening?"*

Every time you go to a health care provider, you are telling him or her a story, or, if you have a chronic condition, part of an ongoing story. It usually begins, "Well, Doctor, I was feeling just fine and then ... happened" or "gradually over time I have noticed ..." In the storytelling world, we call this setting the scene. In the structure of most stories, everything is going along fine, and then something happens. That something can be anything that causes the person's life to change. The table below more fully illustrates this concept. The left-hand column represents the structure of a typical story and the right-hand column is the equivalent health-related story structure.

Story Structure Component	Health-related Story Component
Status Quo	The way your body normally functions
Challenge or Change	Onset of Symptoms or change in symptoms
Rising Action	Symptoms reoccur
Crisis or Turning Point	Realize something is wrong & need help
Climax	Seek professional help
Resolution	Diagnosis, treatment prescribed & health regained—at least you hope the story ends this way.

The stories you tell your providers and how you tell them make a huge difference in how you are perceived and in the care you receive. I'm not talking about fairy tales. I'm talking about the accurate and honest information you tell your health care providers when they ask, "how are things

going?” or “what brings you here today?” In his book *How Doctors Think*, Dr Jerome Groopman says, “What we say to a physician, and how we say it, sculpts his thinking. That includes not only our answers, but our questions.” He also says your *stories* are critical and that you need to help your doctors think.

As a patient with a chronic illness, you are likely to have a team of doctors, rather than just one doctor and each one has a *piece* of your health story. How well do you tell your story to each health care provider? We have all sat and listened to a story told at the dinner table that rambled on and on, was out of order, was not clear, and left us bored or aggravated at the person by the time they finished telling the story. Our doctors are only human and scattered stories told during appointments do have a negative impact on our care. Not only that, they leave us open to delayed diagnoses, misdiagnoses, and medical errors.

Health care providers listen to a new or parts of ongoing stories every 15 to 30 minutes all day. When it is your turn, how well do you get your provider’s attention with your story? How well do you engage him so that he will really hear you and attend to your needs? Studies show that a patient is interrupted within 18 - 23 seconds after they begin to speak at the start of a doctor appointment. Once the provider interrupts, she starts asking questions, and guides the rest of the appointment. You might say, "So what?" At the point of first interruption, you are on the provider's agenda and in his stream of thought. When this interruption happens, it becomes very easy to get sidetracked and not remember everything you wanted or needed to tell, ask, or achieve during your appointment.

Other studies show that when patients state their concerns within the first two minutes of the appointment they get the best results. Therefore, what you say in the first 18 - 23 seconds makes the difference in your ability to finish your two-minute story. If you are well prepared and immediately capture your provider's attention with the way you communicate – the way you tell your story – you will have a better chance of completing your whole story without interruption. You will also give your provider a wealth of information that decreases the chance for a misdiagnosis. Studies reveal that fifteen percent of diagnoses are misdiagnoses.

### ***How Does a Well-told Story Break Through the Interruption Barrier?***

The more you give of yourself and the better prepared you are as you present your symptoms or needs, the better your story will be. In order to tell a good story that helps your provider help you, you need to be fully involved in your care. Keys to being fully involved are:

- Keeping your own set of medical records and having the information captured and organized in a way that gives you fingertip access to the information you need, when you need it.
- At the very least, you need to track your symptoms carefully with frequency of occurrences, time of day, duration, and include other details from your medical history.
- Tell your story in a sequential way using the story structure in the table above.
- Tell your symptoms and needs clearly, concisely, thoroughly, honestly, and accurately.

By doing this you give your provider a more complete and engaging story to work with – *you help them listen*. You give them information they can incorporate, catalog, and connect with their bank of knowledge as you speak. You set them up to ask better questions and set forth a better game plan. The fact that you come prepared with solid information, along with the demeanor of a savvy patient who desires education and participation, speaks volumes without saying a word.

I am not saying that because you gave the provider all the information in a good story that you will get a diagnosis and be cured. I am saying that the better and more accurate the story you tell, the greater the chance your problem will be addressed appropriately and in a timely manner. The provider

will be able to work more diligently with you. He knows knowledgeable patients have better outcomes. You will have taken some stress out of your provider's day.

### **You Make *The* Difference**

Today's environment has forced providers to move patients through their appointments at a faster pace than they would like to. Unfortunately, this pressure creates a more mechanized approach and interferes with good communication. You can influence the environment of your appointment in the first two minutes with a *well-told story* that engages your provider, opens him to listen intently, and allows him to connect the pieces of your story to his bank of knowledge. He is then less likely to interact with you as another routine patient and engage with you as an individual.

*To learn more about how to collect and use your medical information, tell your story and get the care you want, need and deserve, go to <http://www.savvypatienttoolkit.com>*

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*Her book and courses are the synthesis of her education, consulting knowledge, and insights gained from personal and advocacy experiences. She offers a variety of teleseminars and in-person workshops. For more information, and to purchase the first edition, **Lead Your Way to Better Healthcare** or the second edition, **The Savvy Patient's Toolkit**, go to <http://www.savvypatienttoolkit.com>*

