

Your Doctor Said

WHAT?

Dr. Terrie Wurzbacher

Exposing The Communication Gap



Doctor-Patient Communication
“Don’t Be Embarrassed!”

Dr. Terrie Wurzbacher

Are you embarrassed to tell your doctor what your symptoms REALLY are? Do you think he or she is going to laugh at you? Laugh out loud or maybe worse yet, laugh inside – and then go tell everyone on the staff how stupid you are? You’re probably sitting there thinking that you’re the only one who’s ever felt this way or described their symptoms like that....maybe that you’re the only one who’s ever had these symptoms....

I’m not sure I can totally assuage those fears but I will tell you that most people are embarrassed to talk about their symptoms. But there are things they do that are worse than feel embarrassed. Do any of these apply to you or do you know anyone to whom these statements apply?

I WON’T go to the doctor because I’m too embarrassed.

I’m not really sure what I’m embarrassed about but I feel so strange telling my story.

I just know the doctor is going to laugh at me and that would crush me.

I just know that the staff is going to laugh at me and I couldn’t stand that humiliation.

I couldn’t tell HIM (or HER) that.....

Maybe if I talk around the real problem, he’ll guess it.

And the list goes on and on. The two worst things you could do is

- #1) avoid going to the doctor because you’re too embarrassed, and
- #2) beat around the bush hoping the doctor will figure it out.

It’s easy for me to sit here and write that you shouldn’t be embarrassed but that doesn’t help you at all, I’m sure. I will tell you, though, that it’s hard to surprise a doctor. Most of them have seen things that will beat whatever you have wrong with you. And most of them have heard it explained in very strange ways. There are very few things that doctors

or their staffs would even consider making fun of. Remember that they are people too and have possibly even had the same feelings or symptoms that you're experiencing. Some times it's hard to remember that. But even if they seem like the "enemy behind the Plexiglas" they are made of flesh and blood just like you.

But, one way to help alleviate your anxiety is to tell them up front that you're embarrassed to explain what is bothering you. The staff and the doctor will respect that and try to find a way that will ease those feelings.

Do NOT, I repeat "Do NOT" beat around the bush (or talk around your symptoms) hoping that they will figure out what you're trying to talk about. This is so common it's scary. People do this way too much regardless of the reason. This is dangerous because, if you consider all the communication problems that exist, how could you possibly be sure that the doctor will figure it out. We've already established (in other articles and in "Your Doctor Said What"?) that doctors speak another language. Therefore, we don't want to make the gap even wider by not being up front and direct about the symptoms you're feeling. Try to get them all out at once without worrying about if or how they are related. Often, people leave some of the most important clues out of their initial complaint because they do not see how they're all connected. For example, if you've lost your appetite and don't feel hungry, it's not enough to just say that. If the reason you don't feel hungry or don't want to eat is because you get diarrhea and abdominal cramps, tell them that. That's very important. But, it's also more embarrassing to talk about the diarrhea especially.

Tell everything. Spit it out all at once. You could also try writing out all your symptoms and bring that paper with you to the appointment. When you check in, tell them you have written it out because you're embarrassed and because you thought it might help the doctor. Offer that paper to them (make sure it's legible). If the office staff doesn't take it, then offer it again to the doctor "I wrote this out because I'm so embarrassed speaking these things..could you read it doctor? Then I think I could answer any other questions you may have." Now, don't make it war and peace and make sure it's legible – type it if you can. After all, you're trying to make it easier for the doctor to know what's going on with you. If he has to lean over to you and say "hmm what's this word here? Is that 'sex'?" – that would pretty much defeat the purpose of writing it out.

The other thing that writing your symptoms does is to help you put it as concisely as possible, thereby saving time. If you can practice with someone you trust (friend, spouse) talking about these things, then you're a big step ahead. If you don't have anyone you feel you can tell these things to, then say them out loud. So what if it sounds weird. That's how actors practice and how people prepare for presentations. Stand in front of the mirror or just in the middle of the room. Try it in your car (without the kids though). Once you get it out loud, it will be much easier the next time.

If you're concerned that you don't know the proper words to describe what you're feeling, don't worry. Doctors really like it best if you describe things in your own words. But if you have some "unique" word for something that you're sure the doctor won't

know, use the internet to look up a similar word. This will prevent the embarrassment of having to explain what “it” is.

Bottom line is that the office staff and the doctor will not be making fun of you. They really do care about you and want to figure out what’s going on. They may ask what you think are very probing questions but it’s because they’re looking for more clues. As soon as you start to feel embarrassed while you’re talking, visualize your doctor as Columbo with his overcoat and cigar and acting stupid...that should help you go on with your story. Your doctor is being a detective and if you can laugh at Columbo, you can laugh at your doctor.

Tell your primary symptoms up front and do not beat around the bush! If your doctor is to find out what’s causing these symptoms, he must have all the information and the only way he’s going to get it is from you!

For help with talking about your problems (not with a diagnosis but how to phrase things) contact the author at Terrie@askyourdoctorsaidwhat.com .

Dr. Wurzbacher is a retired Navy Emergency Medicine Physician who recognized about early in her career that she wasn’t good at communication and more importantly that she was probably missing much of what her patients were trying to tell her. Although she was excellent at diagnosing conditions, patients generally need more than that. The Emergency Department is one (of many) places that being good at communication is essential since you have no records to work with and a short amount of time to glean information and make a diagnosis. So, she worked diligently at learning to really HEAR what her patients were telling her. Teaching young doctors and ancillary staff the personal aspects of medicine has become a passion of hers. Her book, *“Your Doctor Said What”* is intended to help patients not only understand why many doctors seem like aliens but also how to empower themselves to deal with them. Check her out at <http://www.yourdoctorsaidwhat.com> and <http://www.yourdoctorsaidwhatblog.com> .