

Your Doctor Said

WHAT?

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Exposing The Communication Gap



Doctor-Patient Communication
“There’s Nothing Wrong”

By Dr. Terrie Wurzbacher

What thoughts go through your mind when you hear this - “There’s nothing wrong.” Most likely you hear that the crappy way you’re feeling is all in your head - or so the doctor thinks.

Believe it or not, this is a phrase that’s meant to reassure people. Fat chance of that happening. Once more this shows the major gap between the person uttering those sounds and those receiving them.

What the doctor is trying to tell you is that he cannot find anything serious either on examination or on the testing that he’s done. And you really do not want something to show up on any of those. He is NOT saying that it’s all in your head. There are many things that can be wrong with you but not have major abnormalities that can be easily found.

Part of the problem is that you probably won’t listen to anything else the doctor says after that. Do not fall into that trap. What comes next may actually explain the whole thing. You know how fast doctors talk. They don’t pause between sentences to see how you absorbed or reacted to that statement.

So, what do you do? First, let’s discuss what NOT to do....Do not get upset. Do not shut down. Do not feel abused or ashamed. Do not feel like you’ve been wasting everyone’s time. Do not be angry. Do not discount everything else the doctor’s going to say. Do not get flustered. That’s the most important of all.

Stay alert and open-minded. If you have to regroup, put your hand up to signal the doctor to slow down or even pause. Listen, listen, listen. See what the doctor has to say afterwards. If it doesn’t seem that you’re understanding what he’s saying even though you’ve been trying, stop him and ask for clarification. Say “excuse me” or hold your hand up again. If he’s not looking or listening, try standing up and see if that will give him a clue.

At that point you can simply say “I don’t understand what you’re saying.” Or you can ask specifically “what do you mean there’s nothing wrong? Are you saying that this is all in my head?” One reason we give up so much of our power is that we remain silent. You have to ask for clarification and refuse to be intimidated. You know that there’s

something bothering you. No, it may not be earth-shattering or something that will be a first recorded case – BUT, it’s something making you feel bad enough to come to this humiliating appointment with a doctor who isn’t doing a very good job explaining things to you. Don’t allow that to happen. Don’t give away your power.

Same goes if the doctor says “I can’t find anything wrong”. I know from my 30 years in medicine that just because I can’t find something wrong does NOT mean that there isn’t anything ‘wrong’ with the patient. Doctors do try to find out if there is anything obvious first. And sometimes they will stop looking if there’s nothing found on the basic studies. But most often they will try to find something that will provide relief for you while your body heals – even without anyone ever knowing what it was. They will tell you that you need to come back if you’re not getting any better. This is not just “blowing you off”. It’s because right then they are not concerned that there is something major wrong to warrant other studies. But, they are acknowledging that you don’t feel well and want you to rest, take the symptomatic medicine you’re given and return if you’re not feeling better.

It’s important that you do not give up your power by giving in. Do not leave the office if you’re uncertain what’s going on or what the plan of action is. I know this is difficult but you really can do it. You may have to speak up and say “Excuse me, I don’t understand. Can you explain this to me so I can understand, doctor? Are you saying that there is nothing wrong with me or that you just cannot find something on your tests?” Do not feel as if you’re going to make the doctor mad or he won’t like you or something stupid like that. The doctor will NOT know that you don’t understand unless you tell him. If you don’t say anything, he will only assume that you’re fine with everything he’s said.

For help with communicating with your doctor, 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> .

