



Communication Skills to Help Manage Stress – Inquiry and Stroking

A dentist reported that a patient came in requesting a procedure they heard about, a procedure that wasn't even a real thing, but the patient was adamant it was what they wanted. The dentist tried a lot of explaining, which was poorly received, and stressful for everyone. Let's look at two communication techniques that might have helped.

The technique of **Inquiry** is to ask gentle, probing questions to learn more about what the other person is thinking and feeling. It requires we overcome our natural inclination to explain instead of listen. This is especially powerful when you are inviting them to tell you more about how the two of you disagree. People rarely expect an invitation like that. Asking someone to do this can feel like “opening Pandora’s box” but people might have negative thoughts and feelings anyway – and will communicate them somehow. In addition, asking gentle questions communicates your interest in them. As a side benefit, many people do enjoy talking about themselves when given the invitation!

Stroking involves finding something genuinely positive to say, even in the heat of frustration. It conveys an attitude of respect, even though you may feel frustrated. People want to be cared about and respected, especially in the midst of a conflict situation where they might feel you only have negative opinions about them.

Here's how using these skills might have sounded:

“You have done a lot of research about this.” [**stroking**]. “How did you hear about this procedure?” [**inquiry**]

“Unfortunately, we don't offer the procedure you are describing. What is the result you are hoping for from this procedure?” [**inquiry**]

“Can I tell you about other procedures we do offer that address the problem you want to solve?” [**inquiry**]

Now you know how to frame your explanations, and the patient feels heard because you listened before you spoke, and showed positive regard for their efforts.

Homework: This month, challenge yourself to try this approach. The time you invest in listening is likely to be less than the time you would spend explaining, and much less stressful.

Adapted from David D. Burns, M.D., author of “Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy.”