Chad, a healthy 16-year-old, started vomiting at 1:00 am on a Sunday morning. At 6:00 am, he had the dry heaves, severe abdominal pain, and a fever of 101.4°F. His mother, Alice, called his pediatrician, who instructed her to take Chad to the emergency department for evaluation and treatment. Alice was hesitant to take Chad to the emergency department, assuming it was probably just a virus and would resolve itself in another 12 to 24 hours. Chad’s pain and discomfort persisted, so his mother drove him the 25 minutes to the emergency department. After signing in, Chad and his mother were told to wait in the waiting room and that they would be seen based on acuity. Four and half hours later, with Chad still dry heaving into the waiting room trash can and shivering, Alice demanded that her son be seen and threatened to report the staff for neglect and malpractice. After her son was treated and released, Alice followed through with complaints to the hospital, the state hospital association, and the medical board.

When a person makes that often difficult decision to go to the emergency department to seek medical attention, she or he does so with the expectation that she or he will get help quickly. Just the word emergency implies urgency and a sense of immediacy. For many, the wait can be long and frustrating. For the emergency nurse, there is also frustration. Providing quality care in a competent, consistent manner is priority. Emergency nurses want to make everyone a priority—but know that some patients must be seen before others. How can an emergency nurse facilitate patience among the patients in an ED waiting room?

Patience means different things to different people. The ability to practice patience in the face of a crisis or an extremely challenging circumstances is an important skill for nurses working in emergency departments. The following true scenario helps set a framework for how professionals can promote patience in the most extreme circumstances. Insights that can be gleaned from the scenario are related to the emergency department and provide knowledge on which emergency nurses can base actions in relating to patients and families.

One way to look at it as that “A crisis is temporary, has a sudden onset, and evokes emotional tensions that need to be resolved. The theory asserts that a crisis will disturb the normal balance between the perceptions of problems and the coping resources and strategies. The habitual equilibrium-restoring actions that had served the person in the past now fail.” The level of crisis appeared to vary among the individuals, yet the common bond of sharing it together appeared to be of some benefit, and the collegiality of the shared experience seemed to unite the passengers and have a calming effect.

Feelings of Stress, a Precursor to Impatience

Everyone experiences feelings of stress and anxiety. Intense stress may be experienced in situations that are life-threatening or for which the outcome is unknown. Intense feelings of stress can lead to feelings of crisis and loss of control.

Maintaining patience under certain types of stress is important in maintaining personal equilibrium. Helping others cope with stress is an essential ability for the health care professional. Furthermore, it is important to be able to assist persons in a group to maintain calmness so that riots can be prevented. Coping with stress may involve use of common coping strategies or require rediscovering forgotten skills and developing new ones. To cope effectively with stress, it is important to use various approaches that can assist in coping in all dimensions of life. In the case of Chad and his mother, they had both been awake all night, they were exhausted, he was sick, and his mother was worried about what might be causing his illness. Stress was a precursor to their impatience.

Coping with stress with patience requires a specific kind of coping. Patience is defined by Webster’s New World Dictionary as “the state, quality, or fact of being patient. Patience is the will or ability to wait or endure without complaint.” Patience “requires steadiness, endurance, or perseverance.” Patience implies the “bearing of suffering, provocation, delay, tediousness with calmness and self-control.” Thus coping with patience is a special kind of coping that requires more fortitude and control of spontaneous emotions and expressions.

Strategies for Promoting Patience

There are a variety of strategies that can be used to promote patience in individuals and groups. These strategies are more specific than strategies simply devised for coping with stress. Individuals have a broad range of abilities that can assist in promoting patience. Promoting patience requires steadiness, endurance, or perseverance and requires specific skills related to staying calm.

State the expected time of the delay

When individuals know how long they have to wait, patience is increased. However, even if precise information cannot be provided, if it appears that an attempt is being made to provide as much information as is available, this attempt, in itself, will be reassuring. The nurse in the emergency department may say, “The specialist is still in surgery. I’m sorry for the delay. We do expect him in 20 minutes. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable while you wait?” “Your blood tests have been sent to the laboratory. It will be approximately 45 minutes before we have the results. The doctor has ordered a Doppler ultrasound; unfortunately, this requires that a technician be called in from home on weekends. It will be approximately 30 minutes before the technician will be here.”

In Chad’s case, a reasonable estimate of when he might be seen could have helped his mom decide whether to continue the wait or make a different choice.

Provide Ongoing Information as Individuals Wait

As individuals wait, impatience increases. However, knowledge is power and gives a sense of control. Ongoing information is reassuring and maintains an ongoing sense of control. It is not as important that information is limited as it is that individuals feel information available has not been withheld but is provided. To give a specific example, “The ultrasound technician is on his way to the hospital but has been delayed because of a motor vehicle crash on the interstate, and he has to take an alternate route. Unfortunately, it will be approximately another 30 minutes before he will be here. Is there anything you need in the meantime?”

Frequent updates to Chad and his mom would have reassured them that they were not forgotten and would have given the nurse a chance to observe Chad and reassess his situation.

Maintain a Sense of Humor and Cheerfulness

There are many situations that cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, the attitude that one has in such a situation can be controlled. When those in authority role model humor, this can communicate that choosing to have a sense of humor is an option available to all. “I know after coming from Pennsylvania to see the Notre Dame at-home game, sitting in the emergency department for the entire day is not what you had anticipated as the exciting weekend but I think your ‘story’ to your friends back home will truly top what they expected!”

Although there was nothing amusing about Chad’s illness, a nurse with a friendly and reassuring smile, who can listen to the fear, urgency, and impatience of her patients and continue to smile and reassure them, will go a long way in promoting patience.

Provide Diversional Activities

When people in stressful situations have a way to channel their energy, feelings of stress will decrease. Individuals with time on their hands are also eager to be useful. Having a positive direction in which to channel energy, especially one with the opportunity to help others and make something good out of an otherwise bad situation, can provide a welcome relief, an opportunity to “make lemonade out of lemons.” When family members who wait in the emergency department can be given something to do, for example, feeding the patient ice chips, this can decrease anxiety and make them feel useful.

Chad’s situation could have been helped if the nurses could have given his mother cool washcloths, showed her where to get ice chips, and given her and Chad as much privacy as possible when he needed to vomit.

Summary

There is an art to promoting patience in individuals and groups. Patience is helpful in reducing feelings of crisis and anxiety. Being aware of the potential for increased anxiety and being sensitive to the needs of those experiencing delays go a long way to promote patience. Nurses and other helping professionals are in a prime position to promote patience by providing accurate information—including realistic expectations of time frames, keeping everyone up to date on what is happening, and maintaining a sense of humor. Diversional activities and increasing staff during a crisis may also promote patience. Actions that an ED staff take can promote patience, increase satisfaction with care received, and improve patient outcome.