

*The Patient Experience Post*

Healthcare's Resource for  
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Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

## Listen Up! 5 Tips for Boosting Your Listening Skills

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

A great patient experience is one where the patient feels that they have been heard—and understood. The same is true about a great employee experience. When employees feel heard, and understood, by their peers and their managers, they're more engaged. And, importantly, they're also more likely to provide exceptional experiences for their patients.

Usually, when we talk about somebody we consider to be a “great communicator” we're focused on their speaking or writing skills. Two important pieces of effective communication, without a doubt, but there's one more key to exceptional communication: listening!

Being a good listener is the foundation of being a good communicator. This is particularly true in healthcare settings where the ability to listen effectively to patients, providers and colleagues not only impacts the patient experience—but patient outcomes as well.

We're taught to write in school. We're even taught how to speak effectively. But, chances are you've never received training in how to be a good listener. Listening is an acquired skill and some of us are certainly better than others. We can all use a refresher from time to time, though, about exactly what it takes to be an effective listener. Here are some tips that can help.

### **The Trouble With Technology**

While technology can, in many ways, aid our communication by allowing us to more quickly connect with people no matter where we are, or where they are, it can also be a significant distraction.

We are bombarded every day with email, text messages, social media notifications—along, of course, with the traditional distractions found in any work environment, and particularly in healthcare.

Technology is particularly vexing, though, because it comes along with an implied expectation of immediate response. We've become conditioned to respond immediately to the ping or buzz of an incoming email or text.

What to do about it? Work on acquiring the skill, and the self-control, to turn off the noise of technology so you can focus on what you need to be focused on: your work, your patients, your coworkers.

### **Positive Impact on Safety**

Just think about how effective listening can impact your ability to provide safe and effective patient care. Whether you're listening to a patient, a colleague, or a provider, your ability to be totally attentive and to thoroughly understand what you're hearing is critical to providing both an exceptional patient—or employee—experience, and avoid potential errors.

Being a good listener as a caregiver can improve the quality of the information you gather during handoffs and during patient care, and improve the continuity of care and the elimination of errors.

Baird Group's [Nurse Patient Partnership](#) provides experiential training to assist nurses in improving communication skills.

### **5 Tips for Being a Better Listener**

Following are 5 tips for being a better listener:

1. Eliminate as many distractions as possible. While technology can certainly be a distraction (more about that later), there are many other non-technology related distractions that we deal with every day. This could be as simple as positioning your chair or body so you don't see people walking by as we're talking with a patient, or drawing the curtains to avoid the distraction of a sunny summer day—or a winter snowstorm.
2. Turn off the technology. There's much we can do to minimize the control that technology holds over us. We can turn off our phones. We can turn off the TV, the radio, the computer. We can silence the notifications our smartphones are constantly sending us to let us know a new text mail has arrived or a new Facebook post has been shared.
3. Be "in" the moment. There's a lot of attention on mindfulness these days, and with good reason. The ability to be fully present, and engaged in what is happening around you right now, can help minimize stress and improve your ability to listen effectively to others. Try it.
4. Hone your non-verbal "listening signals." There are certain things that we can do non-verbally to send signals to others that we're

paying attention: maintaining eye contact, nodding, smiling, leaning forward, using open gestures, etc.

5. Validate, paraphrase and recap. Along with non-verbal signs of attentiveness, we can use verbal cues to show others we've listened—and heard—what someone has to say. Validation involves agreeing with, or acknowledging, the point someone has made. Paraphrasing involves repeating back to them, in summary, what you heard them say: "So, what I heard you saying is that you're looking for some options for weight control." Recapping helps to summarize a longer interaction where you state both what you heard and what the next steps will be.

Exceptional communicators are good writers, good speakers and good listeners. Start today to take steps toward working on that third element of effective communication: listening.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.