

How to Make an Appointment with Your Patient

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Whether you are at a social function with a person asking to see you as a patient; on the telephone with a potential new patient wanting to come in for a treatment; or at the reception desk making the next appointment with an established patient, you will go through the same steps when making an appointment.

A common mistake doctors make after the patient indicates they want to make an appointment is to ask, "When do you want to come in?" but to not offer options for the patient to choose. The patient is not a mind reader and doesn't know your schedule. Another common mistake is by saying, "My schedule is completely open; I have no appointments that day. When do you want to come in?" Now the patient wonders how good you are if no patients are coming to you for treatment.

You should handle making appointments by communicating your available days and hours to the patient. Real estate marketing expert Tom Hopkins demonstrates this point using a deck of 52 playing cards. He asks the person to remember one card in the deck. There are just so many options available and a limited number of questions to get to the card selected. There are either black cards separated into clubs and spades, or red cards separated into hearts and diamonds. Each suit (clubs, spades, hearts and diamonds) is then separated into numbered or face cards. The next breakdown is numbered cards. The odd cards are the ace, three, five, seven and nine; even cards are the two, four, six, eight and ten; and the face cards are the jack, queen and king. By asking a total of seven questions, one can figure out which card is selected.

Similarly, you can make the appointment by asking the patient a series of questions. Starting globally, then working smaller and more refined, do the following: state the days of the week you have openings; then the hours you see patients; then the times available in the mornings or afternoons. Once the patient narrows things down, offer the early or late morning/afternoon and the specific time slots still available. In five questions, you can come to a time that works for both you and the patient.

For example: a patient has completed their first visit. You want to make the next appointment while standing at the reception desk. The conversation is as follows:

Doctor: I'm here Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM and on Saturday from 9:00 AM to noon. Is the beginning, middle, or end of the week better?

Patient: The beginning of the week is better.

Doctor: On Monday or Tuesday? Which day would you want?

Patient: Monday.

Doctor: On Monday, I can see you in the morning or afternoon. Which is better for you?

Patient: Morning.

Doctor: I am here from 8:00 AM to 12:30 PM before lunch. Is early morning or late morning better?

Patient: Late morning.

Doctor: I have openings at 10:00, 10:30, 11:00, and 11:30. Which would you like?

Patient: I want the 11:00 appointment. (Confirm this with the patient.)

Doctor: Monday at 11:00. Wonderful. Do you want an appointment card to remind you?

Patient: Yes; I'll put it in my appointment book.

Using these steps, you will eliminate the guessing game for the patient. The patient will feel informed and guided through your schedule to understand your availability. Also, the patient may not know how full your appointment schedule is. Thus, you are creating a feeling of appreciation for getting that appointment.

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