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## Easily Increasing Patient Care Acceptance: The Three Essentials

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Have you ever noticed how two acupuncturists can graduate from the same school, practice in the same town, use the same technique, and share the same philosophy but experience dramatically different levels of success? Many acupuncturists think it is charisma, confidence, or marketing that plays the biggest role. Others believe it depends on how many new patients a practice gets every month or the quality of results delivered. While those factors do play a role, there is another set of factors often not considered in today's acupuncture practice, nor taught in school, practice management, or continuing education classes: the Three Essentials.

### Preparation First

Of course, strategic patient communication is key. Most acupuncturists are good at it. But a look at the evidence suggests it hasn't made much difference in retention or referrals. The utilization rate in acupuncture has changed in the last 30 years, however, third-party reimbursement continues to decline, and acupuncturists need the latest tools to maintain and grow their practices effectively.

But before incorporating the Three Essentials into your consult, you have to know what isn't currently working for you. For example: Do you begin a new patient consult by describing your specific technique or approach, your background, and what acupuncture is? Many acupuncturists do this and think their patients are listening when, in fact, they're not. If you begin a consult this way, the patient may not remember what you say later — what their problem is and how you might be able to help. You don't want to jeopardize that part of their visit. And if you don't start by listening to your prospective new patient, you're dramatically reducing the chance of them listening to you, following your recommendations, and telling others about you.



At the beginning of a new patient visit, tell the patient what to expect. Let them know how long it's going to take. Don't leave a new patient in suspense. They're likely in pain and already anxious as to whether or not you can help. Do consider asking your patient questions about their referrer or something else that establishes common ground and builds rapport.

Then do the thing that most other acupuncturists fail to do: Listen carefully to your new patient and find out why he or she is coming to see you, paying particular attention to the specific language the patient uses. Only after you fully listen to your new patient is it possible to use the Three Essentials.

#### Use Your Patients' Words

Usually, when a person is sharing health concerns with you, you will hear descriptive adjectives. They may describe their "excruciating headaches" or their "stabbing sciatica." The words your patients use are not accidental. If you say "sharp sciatica" after they said "stabbing sciatica," or you say "horrible headaches" when they said "excruciating headaches," you'll leave the patient feeling like you didn't listen or don't understand what they're going through.

As a practitioner, remember the words your patients use. Communicate with them using those terms. This is the first level of building rapport with your new patients. The more rapport you create, the more trust is established and the more likely your patients will follow your recommendations and refer to you thereafter.

#### Ask How They Feel

Now, move from words to emotions to connect with your new patient. Most new patients, especially men, won't disclose how their health issue is making them feel emotionally. Women may be more inclined to volunteer this information.

Regardless, find out how your patient's health concern is making them feel in emotional terms, such as "frustrated," "old," or "desperate." Emotional feelings can count even more than physical ones do. Get to level two or three of building the best possible connection with new patients by understanding their emotional states. You want every new patient to think, "this doctor actually cares about me and knows how I feel." If they don't voluntarily share feelings with you, ask them. Neither assume, nor guess. Incorrectly stating or describing how they feel is worse than saying nothing.

### Find Out What They Want Resolved

People come into your office with back and neck pain, fibromyalgia, and a host of other issues you can help with, but the issue alone is not entirely what the person wants resolved. They may be missing a vital part of their lives due to their health issues. Examples of patient losses could be the elderly man who can't play 36 rounds of golf every weekend due to back pain, or the woman who can't give her children enough attention because of her migraines and low energy.

For everyone, regardless of their physical condition, the loss will be different. You'll have to dig for it. But when you discover what a client's larger desire is in healing and you frame your basis of care around it (instead of around your findings), you'll see a significant difference in retention and referrals.

Some patients will start telling others about you before they get the results they're seeking. Doctors are more rushed and stressed than ever — and that means shorter visits. But if you listen to your patients and apply the Three Essentials, you'll need fewer new patients and less costly marketing. That's the type of practice every acupuncturist deserves.

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