

The Power of Connections

By Jake Poore



Connections are essential. The connections we make with one another are at the very essence of what it is to be human. And when our connections are strong and meaningful, it is as if there is an unbreakable invisible thread woven between one person and another, helping both people feel a little less alone. Think of it as a tapestry of trust, built one thread at a time.

There is great power in the human connections we make, especially in health care. Our team calls this focus on making connections *the human side of health care*. And we are passionate in our belief that if health care systems today want to thrive, they must apply the same degree of rigor and focus toward elevating the human side of health care as they do in perfecting the clinical side of health care. "Good medicine" must include both.

The solution is simple - it's just not easy: Deliver care in a way that is both clinically excellent and also compassionate and kind by making meaningful connections in every patient interaction.

When this happens, it can have a profound effect on the patient experience. But this isn't just some corporate mumbo jumbo. Data consistently proves that patients overwhelmingly value meaningful connections, too.

Research conducted by Press Ganey Associates discovered the key factors that influence a patient's "likelihood to recommend" the emergency department to family, friends and co-workers. It revealed fourteen variables (or loyalty drivers), and twelve of which are directly linked to the *human side of health care* or, to the caregivers' ability to make connections.

A quick scan of this list reveals things such as the patient's perception of how well the care team **listened** to their concerns, demonstrated **kindness and courtesy**, and **communicated** to them clearly and often - all things that are the result of connections. (Note that only two of these variables - pain management and self-care at home - are tied to the clinical aspect of the patient experience.)

There are two key findings from this study:

- Patients place a high value on empathic care and good communication, and
- When caregivers make meaningful connections with patients, it can have a profound impact on the patient experience.

If we don't connect on the human side, we run the risk of cutting those tapestry threads and eroding patient trust rather than building it. How many patient letters have hospital CEO's received that

Press Ganey Associates Study on “Consumerism: Earning Patient Loyalty and Market Share”

Based on 1.39M patients

Staff cared about as a person	0.79
Kept informed about delays	0.72
Pain controlled	0.72
Doctor's concern for your comfort	0.72
Doctor kept you informed	0.71
Staff kept family/friends informed	0.71
Nurses kept you informed	0.71
Information re: self care at home	0.71
Nurses attention to your needs	0.70
Doctor listened to you	0.69
Courtesy toward family or friends	0.69
Nurses listened to you	0.68
Courtesy of the doctor	0.68
Wait in treatment area to see doctor	0.66

Bottom Line: Empathic care and communication are most highly valued by patients.

stated, “Thank you for saving my son’s life, but we’re never coming back!”? Did we make patients and families feel like a burden rather than a priority? Did we make them feel alienated instead of engaging them as partners in their care?

It may be tempting to dismiss the idea of making connections through the human side of health care (kindness, courtesy, listening, empathy, etc.) and say *Wait a minute - we’re a hospital/clinic/ER/pharmacy/practice, not a hotel or theme park! or I’m here to save their lives and care for them!* But the truth is: these variables speak right to the heart of what we mean when we talk about the patient experience.

Whether we like it or not, the way a patient feels before, during, and after their interactions with clinical and non-clinical caregivers is the lens through which they filter their experiences and calibrate their sense of satisfaction and loyalty. People don’t change when they go to the hospital, they are still the same person with the same needs. Since most patients did not go to medical school or nursing school, they are not necessarily comparing one hospital, clinic, or pharmacy

against others, they are comparing any one of these places against their other life experiences. How patients are treated at restaurants, hotels, Uber, Amazon, supermarkets, and their hair stylist set their expectations of how they expect to be treated anywhere. Why should a hospital or a doctor’s office get a pass? According to patients, they don’t!

Another concern is the argument that there is simply not enough time in the day to make meaningful connections. Today’s pressures and circumstances force caregivers to see more patients and manage even heavier administrative workloads in less amount of time. We have found these are not mutually exclusive and great providers have figured out a way to do both.

There are two incredibly simple yet powerful tools you can use to connect with patients without burning precious minutes off the clock. They are Human-Business-Human® and Caring Out Loud®. These two tools not only help elevate the non-clinical, or human side of healing, but also improve trust and communication; lower patient’s anxiety; improve clinical productivity; and comply more to the patient care plan.

Human-Business-Human®

One of the easiest and most impactful ways to connect with a customer, a patient, or a co-worker is to use a technique called Human-Business-Human®, or HBH. The basic premise of HBH is to begin and end every interaction on the human side - by making a connection. We call these bookends “Warm Welcomes” and “Fond Farewells.” In between these connections, conduct your business or clinical reason for the interaction (draw the blood, place an IV catheter, deliver the medication, collect the co-pay, etc).

The HBH Approach Has Two Distinct Benefits.

First, it’s just a nice, courteous thing to do. Consider the customer waiting in line at a store when the employee or cashier yells, “Next!” without ever looking up, versus an employee who makes eye contact, smiles and says, “Hello and welcome...” It literally takes no extra time or effort but it makes a huge difference in helping to create a personal experience rather than one that looks more like an assembly line. And at the end of the transaction, a fond farewell like Chick Fil-A’s standard, “It’s my pleasure” is a kind way to close out the interaction and end on a positive, human note.

The second purpose for using the HBH approach is to break the ice and release the tension of the moment. All patients, regardless of ailment or illness, share a common characteristic: apprehension.

Florence Nightingale's famous quote is worth remembering: "Apprehension, uncertainty, waiting, expectation, fear of surprise, do a patient more harm than any exertion." It's a familiar quote, but one that serves as an important reminder of the mental and emotional state of most patients.

The HBH technique is an intentional way to connect with patients and help mitigate their apprehension, uncertainty, and fear.

By beginning and ending every interaction on the human side as HBH dictates, we leave space to conduct the reason for the business or clinical visit.

And within that space is the second tool - Caring Out Loud®, which extends the caring, courtesy, and kindness to the business at hand and helps give the patient peace of mind.

Caring Out Loud®

Caring Out Loud® is the process by which we proactively anticipate needs by communicating clearly (verbally or nonverbally) with others in a way that reduces any worry, uncertainty, or doubt. In short, it is narrating the process of letting the customer or patient know what you're doing as you're doing it.

Patients say they no longer want to be treated as a one-way conversation. When we do our job tasks without explaining it first — whether it's administering clinical care or conducting everyday business processes — patients may feel like they are being processed. They don't want to feel like a transaction, they want to be included in the conversation of their care (at their level).

When we think about the patient experience journey, the Caring Out Loud® technique is one that we can easily apply in health care. It can help:

- Answer a question
- Anticipate a need
- Calm and reassure an anxious patient



Here's what creating a powerful connection with a patient by Caring Out Loud® looks like in a real-world situation:

Consider a blood draw. My daughter, who is petrified of needles, needed a routine blood draw. When she and my wife arrived at the lab, our daughter was growing increasingly anxious. My wife tried to calm her and explained to her that the doctor needed the blood samples and that, yes, it would hurt for just a moment but that she would be right there to comfort her, hold her hand, etc.

When the nurse came in it was quickly apparent that my daughter was just the next blood draw on the long list of patients that day. With a muffled greeting and an abrupt confirmation of name and date of birth, the nurse quickly prepped my daughter's arm with a cotton swab. She took the needle, and to my daughter's horror, tried to complete the procedure as quickly as possible.

My daughter's anxiety and nervousness caused her to flinch a little when she saw this giant needle headed her way. And as anyone in health care knows, when you're stressed, your muscles tense up which makes your blood vessels constrict, which makes it harder to get the needle stick in the vein on the first or even second try. As a result, the patient gets poked multiple times. No one is happy — especially a nine-year-old patient, who at this point was crying and frightened.

The nurse left for a moment saying she'd be back in a little while to try again. But my wife wasn't having any more. She asked the front reception to have another nurse take our daughter's blood.

Within minutes, another nurse entered the room. He was smiling and he introduced himself to my daughter first and then to my wife.

He made small talk with my daughter, asking her about school and her favorite music and then he said, "I know needles can be scary, but your doctor asked us to get a little blood from your arm this morning. It will hurt a little bit at first, but not for long. And you can stay seated on your mom's lap if you'd like."

Now that he'd made a connection with her, she began to relax. He began to do the blood draw while narrating the process of care as he did his job. He said, "OK, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to take a cotton ball with a little bit of alcohol on it – it will feel a little cold on your skin ... and I'm going to clean the spot on your arm where the needle will go....next, I'm going to find the vein and insert the needle...but before I do, why don't you look at your mom ... she'll hold you still so we'll get it right on the first try, okay? Are you ready?" My daughter shook her head yes. She had relaxed enough that he was able to get the vials of blood he needed on the first try.

This second nurse did everything right. He used the Human-Business-Human technique and greeted my daughter and wife with a warm welcome. And then, during the clinical part of the interaction, he skillfully used the Caring Out Loud® technique to let my daughter know exactly what he was doing while he was doing it.

This nurse leveraged the power of connections to ease a young patient. But the good news is this tool is available to every care team member—clinical and non-clinical. It is available to the housekeepers that clean patient rooms; the person that delivers the equipment; the doctors, nurses, pharmacists who monitor the patient; the technicians, etc.

No matter where you work in health care, no matter what you do, you have the power to make a connection with people in their darkest hour. Health care is complex, costly, and the patient and their family may be confused and in pain. You have the power to help alleviate that confusion, explain that cost, or find someone who can help with the pain. There is some research that shows a direct correlation between smiling (and laughing) and an elevated pain threshold. Imagine how much

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less pain medicine would be needed if we had the ability to make patients smile more often?

Another excellent example of Caring Out Loud® is the Bedside Shift Report. In the past, shift changes used to occur at the nurses' station or another place away from the patients.

However, thanks to Joint Commission recommendations many facilities have adopted the bedside shift report, where the person ending their shift and the person starting their shift do their handoff at the bedside, in front of the patient.

Creating this kind of moment with patients may be challenging at first but there is tremendous value in giving the patient the opportunity to hear the report, ask questions, and become familiar with the care team member taking over their care.

And, there is value for both of the team members (the one leaving and the one just starting their shift) to know important information has been communicated and the handoff is complete.

Conclusion

There's a wonderful quote from the French author St. Exupery, who says, "What is essential is invisible to the eye." It's a good reminder of what's really important.

When we talk about becoming highly reliable in the personal connections we create with patients and with one another, this is what we mean. It's about trying to create that invisible thread between two people.

Making a human connection doesn't have to cost money or take a lot of time. It doesn't have to be

anything profound or grandiose. In fact, it's often found in the mundane, ordinary, everyday interactions. Offering a warm welcome. Sitting with a patient. Taking a knee to get to the eye level of a small child or a patient traveling in a wheelchair. Putting down the smart phone, tablet, or electronic medical record to turn toward the patient and look them in the eye. Listening to a colleague or staff member's concerns with the intention of understanding, rather than (as most of us usually do) with the intention of responding.

The solutions are simple; they're just not always easy to implement on a consistent basis. That's where the tools shared in this article come into play. By adopting Human-Business-Human® and Caring Out Loud® as standard practice, we can begin to forge, and sustain, meaningful connections with patients, employees, and one another, and we can begin to transform the patient experience.

About the Author



Jake Poore is President & Chief Experience Officer at Integrated Loyalty Systems, a company he established following September 11, 2001. Most of the times Poore spends his time in the trenches of health care, working side by side clinical and non-clinical care team members on every

step of the patient experience with the goal of elevating the human side of health care. Poore served as the keynote speaker at NHIA's 2018 Annual Conference where he shared the organizational blueprints needed to build world-class patient experiences.

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