

# What Are Patients Waiting For?

By Karen DeCuir-DiNicola, MA, Founder, WaitWell | Published in Becker's Hospital Review, April 15, 2013

## The "W" word

I'm a patient... you're a patient... we're all patients at one time or another. That means we have to wait. Waiting for a diagnosis, waiting for a test, waiting for results. Most people hate waiting, and your patients hate it too. While waiting, I think about the more productive things I could be doing with my time, and I observe other "waiters." Waiting patients come to you to get better, but instead they end up feeling worse. You can see their anxiety; you can feel their frustration. While you may not be able to completely eliminate waiting, you can change the waiting experience into one that's more productive and healing for your patients, and even for your staff. It can and should start as soon as they walk through your door.

## Transpire vs. inspire

As a two-time cancer survivor, waiting has taken on a whole new meaning for me. During a few several-hour waits, I began to think about how the time could be used more effectively. It could be more calming. It could be more inspiring. It could be an opportunity to create a healing experience for me and the other patients.

Waiting could be seen as a sacred time to take stock of negative behaviors and attitudes, and perhaps start developing healthy new ones. Numerous studies show that frame of mind is extremely important in healing. Just like busy hands are happy hands, a mind positively distracted keeps out all the junk that seeps in when people are about to face a health crisis, a test or even just a high number on the scale. Unfortunately, waiting and exam rooms do just the opposite. They actually increase anxiety.

## Turn waiting into a competitive advantage

A recent online survey conducted by kd3 worx (n=200) found that 41 percent of respondents said their waiting experiences were bad; 33 percent were neutral. Only 26 percent could be classified as positive or providing a "wow" experience. Patients described their waiting experiences as "frustrating and anger filled," "horrible" and "anxiety-ridden." Even patients who waited 10 minutes or less said the experience was "blah," "boring," "okay" and "tolerable." These are not exactly ringing endorsements. Wouldn't you prefer that your patients say things like, "educational," "invigorating" and "healing?" Wouldn't that be an advantage for your practice or facility?

Research indicates that the average wait is 24 minutes, and more than 50 percent of patients spend from less than nine

minutes and up to 16 minutes speaking with their physician. Creating a positive distraction and a healing environment in both the waiting room and the exam room uses 100 percent of your patient time to improve their engagement, relieve their stress (and your staff's) and increases compliance, and in turn healing. This also creates a positive patient experience.

How long do your patients wait? 70 percent of respondents said they would change healthcare providers if their wait is too long. Can you afford to lose patients?

## Don't wait

Overwhelmingly, when asked what makes a great waiting experience respondents said, "Short." But the more important aspect is perceived waiting time. It is impossible to be frustrated, full of anxiety or angry when you are enjoying yourself.

This is good news. You can spend less time looking at your process (although process improvements are important) and more time finding ways to positively use the waiting time. The opportunities to provide positive distractions are directly proportional to your creativity, not your pocketbook.

What is a positive distraction? It's "an environmental feature that elicits positive feelings and holds attention without taxing or stressing the individual," according to Robert S. Ulrich et. al in a 1991 article in the Journal of Environmental Psychology.

Brainstorm around the five senses: touch, sound, smell, hearing and sight. How about purchasing a Keurig coffee maker? How does it smell in your office? Lavender is very soothing, as is the scent of vanilla. What is on the TV? Humor is healing, Jerry Springer isn't. What about a DVD of the old Carol Burnett variety show, or I Love Lucy? Is there music? A great deal of research has been done on the healing aspects of music. Find some online. What about the art on your walls? Pictures of nature have positive impact on blood pressure. What occupies people while they wait in the exam room? What about educational materials? These are just a few ideas.

So what are you waiting for? A great way to address the issue is engage your staff and your patients. Ask yourself: What would make my waiting experience amazing? Ask your patients. Then just do it. Make their visits worth the wait.

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it's about your time...