

# Use Words to Show You Are Taking Responsibility for Being Clear



Using words to show you are taking responsibility for being clear is essential to creating a non-shaming environment for teach-back. A framing statement to initiate teach-back and focus on your communication effectiveness may calm a patient's or client's anxiety and reduce concerns among health team members about making people feel uncomfortable. Such concern is sometimes a barrier for those starting to use teach-back. Studies have shown when health team members convey caring and respect as they ask people to explain back in their own words, it is viewed positively (Anderson, 2020; Miller, 2021; Samuels-Kalow, 2016; Seely, 2022; Shersher, 2021).

Wording that shows you are taking responsibility for being clear can be called *take responsibility* lines since this shifts responsibility for clarity from the patient or client to the health team member. When used effectively, the patient or client is less likely to feel they are being tested, or ashamed if they make a mistake or can't remember.

Two elements can be part of a *take responsibility* line. Sometimes these are used together.

1. Putting the responsibility for communicating clearly on yourself—the health team member. **Example:** “I want to make sure I explained that well.”
2. Acknowledging and/or pointing out that the amount or complexity of the information can make understanding and remembering a challenge.  
**Example:** “That was a lot of information and I know it can be confusing.”

Usually, the *take responsibility* line comes right before a *tell me* line when the health team member asks the patient, family member, or client to explain something back using their own words.

There are various ways to use *take responsibility* lines.

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## Take Responsibility Line Examples

### General

I want to make sure I did a good job explaining.

I want to make sure we've been clear about what you'll be doing at home.

We want to make sure you are safe.

I want to make sure I explained that well.

I want to make sure I didn't leave anything out.

I want to make sure I said that clearly.

Sometimes I talk really fast, so I want to make sure I was clear.

Can you show me how you will use each of these inhalers? This will help me be sure I explained it clearly.

For a child (beginning about age 8 years): To make sure I've done a good job teaching you how to use the medicine that helps keep you from wheezing, can you show me how you will use it...say if you are staying overnight with your cousins?

### Pointing out the amount or complexity of the information

That was a lot of information, so I want to be sure I covered it clearly.

A lot of people find these directions for preparing for your procedure confusing. To make sure I was clear, can you go over what you're going to do to get ready for your surgery?

What I just went over is a lot to remember. Let's make sure your application paperwork gets handled right. Can you tell me what you will do with these forms and the deadline for turning them in?

It can be hard to find the vaccination clinic from here. I don't want you to get lost, so, to make sure I was clear, can you tell me what signs you will watch for as you go?

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## Pointing out the amount or complexity of the information (continued)

We give out a lot of information at this office, so I want to make sure I shared it in a way that's easy to remember.

I know you've talked with a lot of people today, so before you leave the hospital, I want to make sure that we were all consistent about the most important pieces of information we've shared with you.

I explain all these instructions to people every day, and I want to make sure I didn't leave anything important out.

I know you've gotten a lot of information today, so I want to make sure we're on the same page.

## Telling the learner beforehand

This information can be confusing so when I finish, I'm going to ask you to show back to me how you'll use your inhaler.

Our team is working on improving our communication skills, so I would like to ask you a question before you go home to check whether I was clear.

Many people say it's hard to remember all this, so I will make sure we have a chance to go over it before you leave, to be sure all the important information is clear.

We're going to go over a lot of information about naloxone. To make sure I do a good job explaining it all, I will ask you to go over key points in your own words for each thing we talk about.

**Q1:** Where will you store your naloxone kit?

**Q2:** How do you know if somebody is overdosing?

**Q3:** What should you do before you give the naloxone?

**Q4:** How do you give naloxone?

**Q5:** What should you do after you give the naloxone?

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## What will you tell someone else?

What will you tell your mother about what her insurance will and will not cover? Can you go over it in your own words? This will help me know if I explained it well.

I want to make sure we were clear in explaining how and when to call the emergency hotline. Can you please go over what you will tell someone about how and when they can or should use the hotline?

This information is really complicated, and I want to be sure I explained it well so you can tell your spouse what we discussed today.

What will you tell your childcare provider about how to give Juanita her medicine?

For a parent or caregiver: To make sure everyone who watches Amir knows how to help him with his controller medicine—the one that helps keep his asthma from acting up—could you please show me what you will teach them, using your own words?

- And, to make sure I did a good job being clear, can you tell me when he should use it?
- Could you tell me how you will explain his asthma action plan to his dad?

## Behavior change/Motivational Interviewing/Action Plans

We've talked a lot about how you can increase your physical activity. Can you please go over what we talked about in your own words? How will you make it work for you at home?

## Open-ended Questions—A Form of Teach-back in Situations like Follow-up Calls

Please tell me when your appointment for your next HPV vaccine dose is? (instead of "Do you know when your appointment is?")

## Phrases that are Not Take Responsibility Lines

Although the examples below are often used with the intent of confirming understanding, asking questions that can be answered with yes or no, or that put the burden on the patient or client to say they don't understand, does not demonstrate whether they actually do understand. It can also contribute to them feeling like they are being quizzed or feeling embarrassed or ashamed that they do not understand. Or they may say they understand to be nice because they know the health team member is busy or because they think that is what they want to hear.

The examples show how not *showing* you are taking responsibility can come across as deficit-focused—on a patient's or client's lack of understanding, rather than the health team member not communicating clearly.

- Note the difference between saying “I want to make sure **you** understood” (placing the burden on the patient or client) and “I want to make sure **I** was clear” (taking responsibility).
  - I want to make sure **you** understood.
  - I want to make sure that made sense to **you**.
  - I want to make sure I've told you that information in a way that **you** understand.
- These closed questions can be answered yes or no and do not reveal whether they truly understand:
  - Do you have any questions?
  - Do you understand?
  - Does that make sense?
  - Was I clear?
- Using a *tell me* line without using a *take responsibility* line first puts the burden on the patient, instead of the health team member showing responsibility for being clear.
  - Tell me how you're going to...

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