Using Plain Language with Teach-back

Using plain language when communicating important information to patients, families, and clients makes it easier to use teach-back since people will be more likely to be able to teach back if they receive easy-to-understand content upfront. And, if people frequently have trouble teaching back certain concepts, the health team may recognize their own use of difficult-to-understand wording and then be able change it.

So, in addition to being a tool to assess and ensure understanding, teach-back can serve as a feedback loop to the health team to learn about challenging words or concepts, then find and use plain language alternatives that make it easier for people to understand, teach back, and apply in their lives.

> When conveying key information during teaching, explanations, and other important conversations, it is vital to use plain language that is easy to understand and relatable, so people can focus on the message and not have to struggle with the wording or phrasing.

Plain language means using clear language that conveys exactly what the audience needs to know "without unnecessary words or expression." "It is not 'unprofessional writing' or 'dumbing down' or 'talking down' to a person." (NIH Plain Language Initiative. What is Plain Language?)

Plain language is clear. It uses only as many words as needed. It is not baby talk. Rather, it lets people focus on the message instead of complex words. (http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whatisPL/definitions/eagleson.cfm) Remember, it does not replace technical terminology used by health care professionals to ensure clear communication among team members.

Plain language helps everyone. Few people who are not health professionals understand technical health terms, just like a surgeon might not understand the language used by an engineer or lawyer. Research shows people don't remember much of what clinicians tell them. (Miller, 2021; Yen, 2019) Sharing information in ways that make it easier for everyone to understand and remember through plain language can improve communication between people and members of the health team.

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Always Use Teach-back!

Using Plain Language

Speak slowly.

- Use simple words and/or demonstrations.

- Work with a trained health interpreter when needed.

- Focus on *need*-to-know and need-to-do, rather than nice-to-know, information. Nice-to-know can get in the way of need-to-know.

- Limit the amount of information shared at one time. Focus on the three to five most important things they should remember.

- Conversational language—living room or kitchen table language that anyone in your family would understand—facilitates understanding and creates opportunities for dialogue.

- Do not use unexplained or unnecessary technical terms or jargon. Use non-medical language as much as possible. When you must use a technical term, explain it. Sometimes, they will likely hear that term multiple times. If this is the case, let them know. For example:
    - The name of the illness you have is systemic lupus erythematosus. Sometimes it is called lupus or SLE. We will call it lupus, but I want you to have the official name since you may hear that longer name sometimes.
    - This food program is called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. It is called SNAP for short

- Use examples and analogies to explain uncommon words. For example:
    - Walk through this explanation of what happens in sickle cell disease to help people create a mental image:
        - Healthy red blood cells are shaped like a doughnut and can move smoothly through the body's blood vessels.
        - Sickle cell disease causes most of the red blood cells to be shaped like a banana instead of the normal doughnut shape.
        - These banana-shaped red blood cells get stuck in the blood vessels and break down quickly, making it hard for the body to work like it should.
        (Abrams, 2022)

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Using Plain Language (continued)

- Use short statements that don't require concentrated attention to follow the reasoning.
  - Instead of saying:
    - So, we've discussed how you'll be improving your diet over the next few weeks. If the snack at your after-school program is high calorie you'll have several choices including skipping it which might be hard since you said you are often hungry after school, eating only part of it but it can be hard to stop once you start, or getting extra exercise to work it off so we'll go over some ideas for doing that but another approach is to bring your own healthy snack if you can make time to do that the night before.
  - Say:
    - So we've discussed how you'll be improving what you eat over the next few weeks, especially since the snacks at your after-school program aren't healthy but you are usually hungry. Let's go over your choices. You could:
      - Skip the snack altogether.
      - Just eat half of it.
      - Get extra exercise to work it off.
      - Bring your own healthy snack from home.

      Can you go over the pros and cons of each of those choices?

If you are going to cover several things that are connected, start by telling the learner what you are going to do, so they know what to expect. For example:

- I am going to go over the three parts of your asthma action plan.
  - First, we will go over what to do and what medicines to use when you are feeling well and don't have any asthma symptoms.
  - Then we'll talk about what to do and what medicines to use when you have some symptoms or if you can only do some, but not all, of your usual activities.
  - Then we will go over what to do—right away—and what medicines to use if you have really bad symptoms or can't do any of your usual activities.

Always Use Teach-back!

Plain Language Alternatives Example

Instead Of	Confusion	Try Saying
Isolation	Feel alone	Be in a space without other people for a period of time
Snack	Tasty (sweet, salty, special) thing to eat	Small, healthy serving
Exercise	Formal activity with special gear, location, timing, cost	Any activity that gets you moving around
Booster	What you use to sit higher or be taller	Additional shot to give you more protection from infection
Hypertension	Being hyperactive	High blood pressure
Optimal	Positive attitude	Best way

Plain language Dictionaries

Plain language dictionaries can be helpful for getting started and to find good alternatives for complex terms.

- [Everyday Words for Public Health Communication](#)

- [Just Plain Clear - from United Health Care Group](#)

- [Kids Medical Dictionary - Nemours](#)

- [Plain Language Glossary from AHRQ](#)

- [Plain Language Medical Dictionary - University of Michigan Library](#)

- [Plain Language Words (AHRQ)](#)

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