Communication is a Vital Component of Case Management Skills

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Case managers require many of skills to help clients achieve their goals. Through years of work and learning, each case manager builds up an individual style of exhibiting those skills to their patients. In addition to all these areas of proficiency, case managers have to learn the significant beliefs held by the patients they serve in order to build up therapeutic relationships with them. The consideration of these beliefs in crafting a plan of care helps the case manager ensure that the actions taken demonstrate respect for the people with whom the case manager is working.

One of the most essential skills, among all those a case manager must possess, is communication. Recently, the attention of health care workers was directed to health literacy and its influence on the health status of the American population. The studies conducted to examine this relationship highlighted the significance of communication skills in health services. Unsurprisingly, among their findings was that communication skills, namely the formation of effective interpersonal relationships, are vital to the provision of high-quality healthcare.

Communicating with people and receiving information from them is a difficult job even for experienced case managers. Among the reasons communication is so complicated is that it involves much more than just verbal communication. While many think successful health care communication skills are limited to asking questions, explaining symptoms, and discussing health concerns, to develop constructive relationships with clients, their relatives, coworkers, and insurance companies and to be successful in these tasks, case managers have to also be able use vocal tones and body movements to further their meanings, use effective listening techniques, and respond with respect to persons’ words both verbally and through their facial expressions and physical reactions.

One important use of nurse case managers’ communication skills is client teaching. In the United States for the past 20 years, healthcare has been moving toward a more preventive, holistic, patient-involved model. Case managers have been central to instilling this healthcare model in patients. Today, a rising number of patients are leaving the hospital earlier and assuming more responsibility for their own healthcare at home sooner. These changes raise the need for more coordination of goal-oriented, cost-effective health care. The nurse case manager is essential in this process because he or she provides the patients with the education necessary to deal with these conditions effectively.

It is estimated that nurse case managers spend at least 30% of their time on teaching clients (Storfjell & Jessup, 1999). This teaching is essential in helping clients gain independence and accountability in decision making. The old example of patients assuming inactive, needy roles has been exchange by patients taking an active role in their health care and taking responsibility for management of their diseases. This is accomplished through supportive case management relationships. The case management’s communication skills contribute to trust, formation of new knowledge, and eventual behavioral changes, which positively affect clinical outcomes. (Haley, J., 2007).

Because of this, it is important for nurse case managers to possess communication skills beyond authoritative skills. Facilitative skills in collaborative decision making and patient education are also needed to guide the client to learn problem-solving techniques and self-direction.

In his Six Category Interventional Analysis (1986), John Heron outlined the categories of communication skills needed for successful patient education. These categories consisted of prescriptive, informative, confronting, cathartic, catalytic, and supportive skills. The prescriptive, informative, and confronting categories required a more authoritative approach. On the other hand, cathartic, catalytic, and supportive categories called for a more facilitative approach. The prescriptive category seeks to influence and direct clients’ behavior, starting from gentle suggestion and advancing to strong advice (“I recommend you call your physician about your pain.”). In the informative category, the nurse case manager tries to provide clients with new knowledge, information, or instruction that is relevant to their needs (“That medication can cause nausea and vomiting.”). In the confronting category, the case manager looks to confront some preventive behavior or belief, which is held by the client (“You’ve often stated how you want to lose weight, but you also say you don’t want to diet or exercise.”). By facing the patient with an uncomfortable reality, the case manager tries to elevate awareness so the client can reach understanding and self-awareness of their unhealthy behaviors.

In the facilitative categories, it is the client who is permitted to maintain the focus of control. Cathartic communication skills are used to help clients release emotional distress (“It’s all right to feel afraid”). The catalytic technique is used to help clients see and solve problems and become responsible for their own care (“What would you like to do next?”). The supportive technique involves using sympathy, understanding, and listening to encourage the client to be involved in discussions and decision making (“You’ve made a lot of progress in learning to control your diabetes.”).

The study cited showed that while the most effective form of communication to use while engaged in client education is catalytic, unfortunately nurse case managers most often use supportive communication instead, usually because they are worried about being pushy or offending the patient. As the practice of case management has a primary goal of assisting in collaborative decision making and client self-confidence, it is important for nurse case managers to use catalytic communication skills to teach clients self-direction. While they should refrain from being rude, a stronger approach is needed for more results.

Through education, a case manager can help a client cope with chronic illness and adjust to their prescribed treatment plan. It is essential for patients to have not only knowledge but also an understanding of their medical conditions and plans for treatment. By learning how to take care of themselves and why certain procedures are needed, patients become both better able and more motivated to comply with treatment. Because of this, their vulnerability to illnesses decreases and quality of life improves.

Sadly, it is all too common for sick clients to have knowledge deficits in the understanding and managing of their medical conditions. This makes the communication role of the nurse case manager vital in checking patients’ knowledge holes and helping to fix them. Patients often remember just a small portion of what they were told during outpatient meetings, and even less of the suggestions that were given to them during hospitalization. Nurse case managers can help overcome these obstacles by providing clients with important health information at the time and pace that is specifically suited to the patient, thereby increasing their understanding and comprehension (Haley, J., 2007).

Far from being a mere assumption, the importance of communication in case management has been proven to be an successful in altering patient outcomes to decrease hospital lengths of stay, readmission rates, and emergency room visits (Harrison, Nolin, & Suero, 2004). In the case of hospital visits, the role of the nurse case manager is providing a more clinically oriented approach to the coordination and integration of care. After patients have been discharged from the hospital and allowed to return home, communication is crucial to ensure a safe discharge and transition. The case managers’ job is to make sure that communication between all participants is effective, whether it’s between members of the treatment team, the patient and family or caregiver, the person paying, or anyone else directly or indirectly involved in the well-being of the patient.

When patients don’t follow their discharge instructions and end up back in the hospital, it may be that they simply don’t understand what they were supposed to do at home. That’s why case managers must make sure those patients and family members understand what they should do after discharge and why it’s important.

As they work with the treatment team and manage patient care activities, case managers almost always are involved in transition-of-care activities. Successful communication in this context means that a case manager provides correct and complete information to the right person at the next level of care in a timely manner. It is imperative for the case manager to also communicate with that care-giver to ensure that the person receives the information, understands it thoroughly, and plans to implement it as necessary. The person receiving the care-related information may be a case manager at another facility. If so, he or she must ensure that the information necessary for effective patient care is also communicated to the rest of the local care team. Getting this information out there quickly is of utmost importance.

Case managers should also communicate with the patient and their family to encourage them to actively participate in decisions regarding the next level of care. Patients need to know where they are going, why they are going there, what is going to happen to them, and what their options are. Medication understanding is an important part of ensuring that patients safely transition to another level of care. Case managers need to make sure that patients understand how and when to take their medication.

As the practice of case management becomes more prevalent in helping clients to develop responsibility for their health care, there will be an increasing need to identify and develop effective communication skills for nurse case managers to utilize in teaching their clients.

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