

Communication Strategies for Keeping Families Up to Date

Effective communication is always important but is critical in this COVID-19 environment with heightened emotions, fear of the unknown and restrictions on family member in-person visitation. Family members want to know that their loved one is safe, that providers are doing everything possible to protect their loved ones, and to feel a sense of connectedness especially because they can't be with their loved ones.

Potential Tactics for Communication During COVID-19 Pandemic:

Below are ideas for communicating with family members. This is not an all-inclusive list, nor are these requirements. However, using several of these tactics can help ensure that residents and families receive important information during this challenging time.

1. Commit to communicating with families on a weekly basis with an update on their loved one. Options include:
 - a. Designate a staff member per day to call families and split up the list of family members over the week so that each family receives a weekly update.
 - b. For challenging situations, consider who is the best communicator and has the strongest relationship with the family member.
 - c. Use different ways to communicate with family members such as phone calls, Skype or FaceTime, HIPAA compliant texting if giving PHI information, etc.
 - d. Utilize staff whose workload and activities may have changed due to COVID-19, such as admissions and marketing staff, to provide updates to family members.
 - e. Designate specific staff members that are skilled at communication to give updates, such as the social worker. Given that this is a high stress time, the social worker will be skilled at addressing the emotional and psychological strain the family is experiencing.
 - f. Have the activities coordinator provide updates especially as families are wanting to ensure that their loved one is not only safe but engaged.
 - g. If a resident is in therapy, have therapist use video technology to allow family to see resident's progress.
 - h. Tag a quick clinical update to the end of a resident/family interaction.
 - i. Use video technology for engaging family members in care plan updates and involve the resident as part of it. This achieves three things: the ability of family to see their loved one, meet care plan requirements, and provide an update.
2. Provide a weekly update to families explaining what is occurring in the facility and what steps the facility is taking. Options include:
 - a. Have a designated COVID-19 phone line that families can call into to hear updates and/or leave a message with questions. This enables staff not to be inundated as they work, but also gives an avenue for family members to be

heard. Ensure that there is staff designated to check the messages daily and respond.

- b. This could be a “push” message to families via a phone call or email if facility has the capability.
- c. Consider messages from the Medical Director, Administrator or Director of Nursing.
- d. Utilize your facility website to provide updates to families and the community at large.

Prior to Communication Consider the Following Steps:

1. Be aware of the importance of non-verbal communication even over the phone. Body language such as smile and posture, tone of voice, rate of speech, and your frame of mind all impacts the message.
2. This is a stressful time, take a deep breath before making the calls, especially the more challenging ones.
3. For challenging dynamics, consider having an additional team member as support and witness.
4. Ensure that you have the information to be communicated and that it is as complete as possible.
5. Think through the potential questions that could come up with the information being provided and if you will be able to answer it or not. It can be helpful to think through what you would want to know if your loved one was in the same situation.
6. Understand that family members are experiencing a range of emotions such as fear, guilt, anxiety, frustration, relief. It is likely that they will want to know what the continued prevention efforts are if the virus is not in building. If COVID-19 is in the building, be prepared to discuss what the facility is doing to actively contain and prevent further spread.

During Communication:

1. Again, be aware of non-verbal communication.
2. Acknowledge how difficult this situation must be for the family member and be empathetic.
3. Use reflective listening, i.e. clarify that you or they have received the message as is intended.
4. Be honest and genuine.
5. Speak slowly and clearly.
6. Express appreciation for the partnership with the families, conveying the message that we are all in this together and have common goals.
7. Ensure that at the conclusion of the conversation, family members are left feeling that they truly matter and are not just another number, statistic or completed task.
8. Document each interaction with family members.