

Reading Lines: Responses to Pain

Read aloud some examples of how people might react to symptoms of illness and pain.

Notice the differences in how people respond, based on personal values, beliefs, and their culture. This can explain some of the differences in how we react and express ourselves in our illness and recovery.

Stoic Attitude

Elderly man and his neighbor

Man: I just got home from the hospital yesterday after having surgery. (He is in curled up position in chair grimacing and tense.) I don't feel like talking this morning.

Neighbor: You look like you have a lot of pain. I will bring you one of your pain pills.

Man: No, I am fine, I don't need any pain medication. I don't want to become dependent on medicine.

Neighbor: But you just had surgery. You need it.

Man: I do not need it. I am a strong man. You won't see me moaning or complaining. I will get through it.

Neighbor: It would be good to have better pain control because you could be more active, breathe deeper, and sleep better. It's not good for your health to be in pain.

Man: I understand, but I really don't want the medication. I believe the pain makes me stronger.

Neighbor: Okay, I respect your wishes, but let's talk more about it. If you are worried about addiction, or side effects, we can talk more about that.

Man: You can talk all you want, but I won't change my mind.

Neighbor: We'll talk after I get you some breakfast.

Discussion:

How would you feel if you were the man in this situation? The neighbor?

Is this how you would like to be treated? Why or why not?

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Dramatic Attitude

Excitable man and his caregiver:

Man: (crying out loudly, gesturing and moaning when neighbor helped him put on his hand splint.) I feel terrible! I need another pain pill. I can't stand it!

Neighbor: What's wrong? Where is the pain?

Man: My hand hurts! My doctor said the splint would help, but it is not getting better soon enough!

Neighbor: Let's put on some music to help you relax. Would you like to use a warm pack on it like the doctor suggested?

Man: Yes, but I want the pain pill, too, so I don't have pain while I get dressed.

Neighbor: OK, I'll get you some water so you can take your pills.

Discussion:

How would you feel if you were the man in this situation? The neighbor?

Is this how you would like to be treated? Why or why not?

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Depressed/Anxious attitude

Anxious woman and her neighbor:

Woman: (crying and rocking in chair)

Neighbor: You look upset. What is the matter?

Woman: It hurts here (points to chest and pounds it lightly).

Neighbor: Do you have pain in your chest?

Woman: No, but it hurts in my heart because I am sad and worried about my son, who is in trouble.

Neighbor: Let's talk about the problem he is having. Maybe I can help.

Woman: Yes. I will tell you about it. Maybe it will help me feel better.

Discussion:

How would you feel if you were the woman in this situation? The social worker?

Is this how you would like to be treated? Why or why not?

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Patronizing attitude (treating her like a child)

Elderly woman and daughter:

Daughter: Good morning, mother. Did you sleep well?

Mother: No, I had pain in my legs, so I didn't sleep much.

Daughter: Oh! I feel so sorry for you! I will help you put your pants on so you do not have to move your legs. You should use the wheelchair today.

Mother: Maybe so. I'll do what you say.

Daughter: Yes.

Discussion:

How would you feel if you were the woman in this situation? The daughter?

Is this how you would like to be treated? Why or why not?

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Attitude encouraging independence

Daughter: Good morning, mother. Did you sleep well?

Mother: No, I had pain in my legs so I did not sleep much.

Daughter: Oh! Do you think we should have put the pain pills by the bed so you could have taken one during the night?

Mother: Yes, I think we should do that tonight.

Daughter: Then you would wake with less pain, so your morning would be more active and enjoyable. Would you like a pain pill now?

Mother: Yes, it will probably help me feel better so I can get up and dressed.

Daughter: It will start working in about 20 minutes. Is that when you want to get dressed?

Mother: Yes. That sounds good.

Discussion:

How would you feel if you were the woman in this situation? The daughter?

Is this how you would like to be treated? Why or why not?

Since we all react differently to the experience of pain, the caregiver and patient relationship needs to adapt and change. When the beliefs of the caregiver and patient do not meet eye to eye, the relationship can end in frustration.

But if we respect and value each other's differences, we can avoid some of the conflict in the journey of recovery.

Knutson, M. B. (2017). Reading Lines: Pain Responses. Retrieved from Health Vista website at <http://www.healthvista.net/health-resources/recovery-resources/> under the heading Support/Managing Symptoms