



## Using the Wait to Educate: Promises and Pitfalls!

*A guest article from Robert J. Davis, PhD, MPH*

Ask people to describe sitting in a health care waiting room, and their responses are likely to include “boring,” “time wasting,” and “stressful.” Negative feelings such as these can adversely affect patients’ perceptions of quality of care and reduce the likelihood of return visits.

One proven way to enhance the waiting experience is to engage patients with video-based education and information. Such an approach can relay evidence-based messages about relevant health issues; increase familiarity with clinic policies, staff, and services; and provide a distraction from the wait. When done properly, waiting room education can increase patient satisfaction, according to research.

To succeed in mental health centers, video-based educational programs must be sensitive to the particular needs of the patient population. Here are key five guidelines to keep in mind.

1. **Avoid triggers.** Health information from TV news or web sites is often scary and anxiety provoking, with warnings about deadly conditions or hidden threats lurking around us. Stay away from such sources of information. Likewise, steer clear of general news reports, whether video or text on the

screen, which can serve as triggers for patients. Instead, look for health content with a non-sensationalized, reassuring tone. If non-health content is included in the mix, it too should be calming and not evoke fear, anger, or other negative emotions.

2. **Don't promote self-diagnosis or specific treatments.** If patients see content about the signs of a mental health condition such as depression, they may be influenced to answer questions in a certain way during an evaluation or to misdiagnose themselves. Similarly, information about treatments such as a specific prescription medication may lead patients to demand inappropriate therapies. As a result, health education programs should focus on conditions and treatments in a general way, rather than on diagnostic criteria or the features of a particular drug or class of drugs. Pharmaceutical ads should be avoided.
3. **Focus on comorbid conditions.** Patients with mental health conditions often have comorbidities such as hypertension, diabetes, or COPD. That's why it's important to include wellness-related content on issues such as healthy eating, exercise, smoking cessation, and medication compliance.
4. **Make your messages friendly and clear.** Messages created by the mental health center about practice-related issues should make the environment feel safe and welcoming. Use warm, friendly language and images of smiling people. Reminders about issues such as canceling appointments or getting refills should be gentle, not harsh or threatening. In addition, they should be extremely clear so as not to cause confusion and anxiety for patients.
5. **Have high standards.** Content that is poorly produced can reflect badly on the professionalism of a mental health center, so select programs with high-quality production. Make sure the programming is engaging and includes little or no repetition during a typical wait. Content that fails to meet these standards can backfire by annoying patients and making them more aware of the wait rather than distracting them from it.

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