

Patient Problem-Solving with Scripts: A 5-Step Process

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Some problems will inevitably arise between your practice and your patients, even though you've done everything in your power to avoid such situations. You can't prevent these issues totally. You can, however, figure out what would be the best way to deal with each scenario and then create patient problem solving scripts to guide you and your staff.

To prepare for non-clinical problems that involve patients, follow these five steps:

1. Draw up a list of possible issues.

At a special team meeting or during a Monthly Business Review, brainstorm patient-related scenarios that may occur. These will be based in part on problems you've experienced in the past. There are three main areas in which dental practices are likely to encounter difficulties:

- *Scheduling* – Problems with scheduling occur frequently (in some practices, daily). Scheduling issues include patients not scheduling their next appointment at checkout, last-minute cancellations, no-shows and patients who show up late for their appointments.
- *Collections* – Among the most stressful in dental offices, these problems are all too common. List the types of payment issues your staff has to deal with, from the incidental to the serious.
- *Negative Comments* – Criticism of your practice can come in several forms. Patients may complain to you or members of your staff. You may get negative feedback from patient surveys. Disgruntled patients may attack your reputation online.

2. Define objectives for resolving each problem.

In a given situation, what outcome would be best for all parties? What would you like to see happen? Problem resolution often requires some negotiation and compromise, but you'll play your role better if you focus on moving toward a reasonable goal.

3. Plan how to accomplish those objectives.

Working together with team members—especially those who will be directly involved in addressing a problem—figure out a fair and reasonable solution and define what conditions must be met and what steps must be taken to achieve it.

4. Translate that strategy into scripting.

With your goals and strategic plan in mind, construct your side of conversations with patients, including variations based on patients' reactions. These scripts will serve as pathways to the best possible outcomes.

5. Use script training to prepare everyone.

Once your scripts are ready, schedule training sessions in which team members role-play with each other. They'll learn the problem-solving process that the scripts map out... and also how to follow that process using their own words.

Go through this process and, when a problem arises, you and your staff will know immediately what to say and do. Problem situations will be far less stressful, and you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you did your best to resolve the issue and preserve the mutually-beneficial relationship between patient and practice.

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