

# How I define patient engagement

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Do you feel connected with your doctor or other health care providers? Do you partner with your providers? How important is patient engagement to you? What words do you use to define patient engagement? Do you consider yourself an empowered patient or health care consumer?

What is patient engagement?

Here is how I define patient engagement.

Patient engagement is a connection between patient, caregiver and health care provider. An empathetic and trusted relationship forms and mutual respect is fostered. Patients and their families are empowered and they are active in health care decisions. However, patient engagement begins before the initial interaction with health care providers. When patients and consumers recognize the need to be in charge of their health, patient engagement evolves. Patients and consumers have a choice to be an active participant in their health care. Those patients and consumers who choose to be actively involved and in charge of their health work together with their health care providers to successfully reach their health goals and needs.

Doctors, nurses and other health care providers can help empower patients and caregivers. When patients and caregivers feel empowered they are better able to participate in their health care.

## **Engage with empathy, collaboration and communication**

**Empathy.** With empathy we can connect, engage and empower our patients. Empathy allows us to understand what patients are experiencing. By acknowledging their emotional state and listening attentively, we can engage our patients and empower them to be proactive and in charge of their health care.

According to Jodi Halpern, M.D., Ph.D., author of [“What is Clinical Empathy?”](#) published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*: “The whole point of empathy is to focus attention on the patient.” Halpern writes that empathy facilitates patient trust and disclosure and “empathy makes practicing medicine more meaningful. [...] Empathy involves being moved by another’s experiences.”

I feel understanding the patient experience, clinically and emotionally, is paramount in developing a connection with them to help promote an empowered patient. A leading group from the [Society for General Internal Medicine](#) defines empathy as “the act of correctly acknowledging the emotional state of another without experiencing that state oneself.”

“Patients’ words communicate meanings that cannot be summarized on a preformed checklist,” [writes Halpern](#), and empathy directly enhances therapeutic worth. Empathy can help enhance the doctor (provider)/patient relationship. How important is empathy to you? Do you feel your doctor or other health care providers are empathetic? Do they take time to truly understand what you are experiencing?

*The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy.*

– Meryl Streep

**Collaborate.** Collaborating with your doctor and other health care providers can help you become engaged and empowered in your health care. Developing a partnership with your health care provider is paramount.

The Society of Participatory Medicine is a movement to help patients become more active in their health care by learning to partner with their providers. The Society for Participatory Medicine is a 501(c)3 public charity devoted to promoting the concept of [participatory medicine](#) by and among patients, caregivers and their medical teams and to promote clinical transparency among patients and their physicians through the exchange of information, via conferences, as well as through the distribution of correspondence and other written materials.

Regina Holliday, a patient advocate and artist, started the Facebook group Partnership With Patients, which has 475 members to date. Regina Holliday explains that the Partnership With Patients group was created as an extension to a webinar call that got off to a slow start between The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) officials, patients, and a PR firm. The purpose of the call was supposed to be a collaborative webinar, she explained in an email, but instead patients didn't have time to speak or openly collaborate until after 1.5 hours into the call. Holliday spoke out and patients followed.

Ultimately, the call was a success. "Patients took over the call and spoke about our views on the CMS-funded initiative Partnership for Patients," she added. "We began a grassroots effort as a loose confederation of advocates joining forces with CMS and the Partnership for Patients campaign to reduce health care harm. Partnership With Patients was founded to support their [CMS] [Partnership for patients](#)." An in-person summit is being planned for September in Kansas City, Mo.

**Communicate and listen.** Listening is an extremely important skill, and understanding patients' needs are critical. Communicating with patients in simple language is essential. As health care professionals engage their patients with empathy, we can make them feel valued and respected, and by listening and communicating effectively with our patients we can develop a treatment plan specifically around their needs. Patients are the center and the [most valuable member of the team](#). We need to involve them in their care and understand that they are the integral part of the health care team. We need to encourage them to be a proponent of their own health care. We need to let them know that it is okay to ask questions and to take charge of their health. Patients may have some self-doubt about questioning health professionals. They may feel uneasy and perhaps they may have difficulty expressing themselves, but we can offer reassurance and continue to encourage them to be proactive.

### **Bottom line**

To effectively engage patients and caregivers, it is critical that health care providers engage with empathy. With empathy we connect, we understand, we listen, and we communicate. We can engage and empower our patients to be proactive and in charge of their health. It's essential for

patients and consumers to understand that they have the choice to be empowered and in charge of their health care. It's helpful to partner with your providers.

*Barbara Ficarra is creator, executive producer and host of the [Health in 30®](#) radio show, and founder and editor-in-chief of [Healthin30.com](#).*