

# Guide to Delivering Empathic Virtual Visits

It goes without saying that when team members use skills and techniques to convey empathy, they build trust, lessen anxiety, and show others how much they care. Empathic communication also leads to better compliance, improved outcomes, and increased customer loyalty.

As virtual visits such as tours, care plan meetings and family FaceTime, become a larger part of our “new normal,” conveying empathy virtually will be essential to creating meaningful interactions with residents/families. This guide provides specific techniques to deliver empathic virtual visits.

## 1. Create an environment in which you are best positioned to be fully present.

- Become familiar with your technology. Have the ability to contact a nearby resource in case you need help.
- If visit is discussing PHI information conduct the visit in a private space. Families will be more comfortable if they believe their loved ones privacy is being respected.
- Reduce unnecessary noise. If applicable close the door and/or eliminate other sources of noise. For example: Hearing other speak in the back ground, overhead noises, etc.
- Mitigate interruptions by letting others know you are with a family, if it is a virtual tour ensure your route is free of interruptions and clutter.

### FOR VIDEO APPOINTMENTS

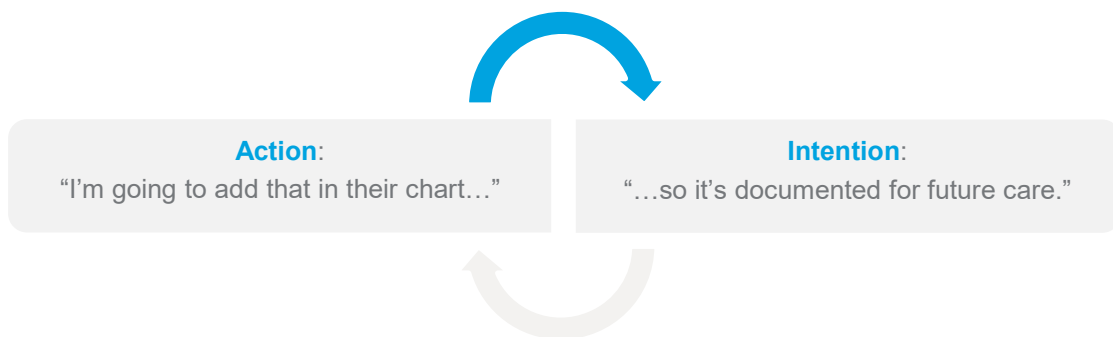
- Make sure your background is not distracting—remove any visible clutter.
- Dress professionally. Wearing the same attire or uniform you wear during an in-person visit sets a professional tone during a virtual visit. (Attire should also translate well on camera—e.g., it should not be too dark or reflective.)

#### Put the family at ease so they can give their full attention to the visit, by:

- Introducing yourself first, by telling them your name and role.
- Beginning the visit with a question or comment to build rapport before launching into “business.”
- Referencing their loved ones medical record or inquiry information to show that you’re prepared for the visit.
- Giving the family the opportunity to open up by asking an open-ended question—e.g., “What are you most interested in discussing today?”

## 2. Practice mindfulness by being fully present and listening.

- Before beginning the virtual visit, adopt an empathic mindset by reflecting inwardly on what the family might be going through.
- Mitigate distractions by taking a deep breath or stretching. This can help you clear your mind, preparing you to give them your full attention.
- Position your camera so they can see your face. Your upper body should fill most of the camera frame. If multiple family members are present for the call, make sure both are in the camera frame, so you can see and respond to both.
- Don't multi-task during a virtual visit.
- If you need to use a device other than a stable computer, let them know. Use statements to match your actions and your intentions, for instance:



### Pay attention to your body language:

- **Make eye contact by looking into the camera. Don't look at yourself on the screen. Place your camera at eye-level, so it'll be easy for you to maintain comfortable eye contact.**
- Sit up straight, square your shoulders, and plant your feet on the floor.
- Use gestures, such as nods, to show that you're listening.

### Pay attention to your facial expressions and tone of voice:

- Avoid eye-rolling, smirking, and other expressions that convey judgement or disinterest.
- Speak clearly.
- Use the appropriate strength and speed of voice. Remember, it can be easy to speak too loudly during a call.
- Be aware of the words you emphasize.
- Match your tone with the appropriate emotions.

### Don't interrupt. Just listen.

- If possible, place yourself on Mute while they are talking, to avoid interrupting them.
- Refocus your attention, if needed.
- If you are conducting the visit by phone without video, give them the same considerations you would if you were communicating by video or in person.

**3. Listen for facts and emotions. Seek to identify their emotions and connect with those emotions in a personal way.**

- As you are listening to the person, ask yourself, “How is this person feeling?”
  - Families may be emotional about many things in addition to their loved ones health and well-being. Open your heart and mind to everything they may be feeling.
- Identify the person’s emotions.
- Validate the person’s emotions by recalling a time you felt the same way.
- Pay attention to the person’s body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice:
  - Remember, body language tells you more about how a person is feeling than their words do.
  - If necessary, stop the conversation to ask probing questions. Use teach-back techniques to ensure understanding.
  - Offer words of assurance and encouragement.

**4. Express empathy: Say out loud how you believe the person is feeling, or what they are going through.**

- You can make your empathy known through empathic statements, which make them feel heard and understood. These statements lessen anxieties and show that you really care. A few examples of empathic statements are:
  - “You seem worried.”
  - “I can imagine how afraid you must be right now.”
  - “That must be hard.”

## SCENARIO:

During a virtual visit, you observe the family suddenly lean back, raise one eyebrow, and give an uncertain look.

### Communication

Skill/technique	Statement	Impact
<b>Empathize</b>	“You seem worried.”	The empathic statement indicates that the provider is really listening and paying attention. He/she senses something is wrong.
<b>Own misunderstandings or communication breakdowns</b>	“What can I repeat for you? I want to be sure you understand.”	Taking ownership of the interaction—rather than accusing them of not understanding—demonstrates your accountability for a successful interaction.
<b>Teach-back</b>	“How will you explain what we’ve been saying to your mother?”	Using teach-back gives the provider the opportunity to check their understanding and reiterate key points.
<b>Validate</b>	“Don’t worry. Others find this confusing, too.”	A validating statement lets them know that they’re not alone.
<b>Assure</b>	“You’ll be fine. We’re in this together.”	This type of statement reassures them and reinforces the partnership.

## 5. Use service-recovery skills.

- Service recovery is how an organization resolves customer dissatisfaction. Often associated with a service failure, service recovery also applies to addressing disappointments and unmet expectations, and (because the healthcare experience is often extremely emotional) attending to their emotions.
- When done effectively, service recovery de-escalates situations, illustrates the provider's understanding of what the customer is experiencing, and shows the provider's willingness to make the situation better.

### EFFECTIVE SERVICE RECOVERY SKILLS:

- Listen attentively, for both facts and emotions. Display positive body language.
- Empathize by saying out loud how you believe the person is feeling.
- Apologize without placing blame or making excuses.
- Own the situation and do what you can to help.
- Thank the person.
- Conclude by asking the person, "Is there anything else I can do?"

### SCENARIO:

At the end of the virtual visit, they says, "Okay, I think moving in is the right choice for mom. I hope the side effects aren't too bad."

### Ideal response

Service-recovery skill	Action or statement	Impact
<b>Listen</b>	Listen attentively for facts and emotions and display positive body language.	This shows respect for the person and interest in what they're saying.
<b>Empathize</b>	"You seem concerned."	This illustrates your understanding of how the person is feeling and what they are experiencing.

<b>Apologize</b>	"I'm sorry."	This offers the person another gift of empathy.
<b>Own</b>	"I'll call you 3 days after she moves in to tell you how she is doing and to see how you're doing. If changes are needed, we will make them."	This lets the person know what can be done to resolve the concern. Using the pronoun, "I" instead of "We" demonstrates your personal level of ownership for the solution.
<b>Thanks</b>	"Thanks for saying something. I wouldn't want your concern to prevent you from making the move."	This shows that their concerns are welcomed and appreciated.
<b>Conclude</b>	"Is there anything else I can do for you?"	This opens the door for you to assist them in other ways.

**NRC Health Improvement Advisors are available to answer your questions and present this material via webinar to large groups.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/doctor-patient-visits-1035514>  
<https://www.bmj.com/content/328/7438/501>