

# Empathy: Talking to Patients About Substance Use Disorder



**As a clinician, you have an important role in screening patients for a substance use disorder and connecting them to treatment resources. You may also be actively involved in their treatment.**



**The following tips can be helpful for engaging patients and reducing their anxiety when discussing substance use and substance use disorders:<sup>1</sup>**

▶ **Ask permission and provide options.**

- Start by letting your patient know that you care about them and want to partner with them in getting them the help they need. For example, ***“Would it be alright with you if I asked you some questions about your substance use?”***
- Reassure your patient that they have the option of not answering a question if it makes them feel uncomfortable.

▶ **Normalize the conversation.**

Tell your patient that any discomfort they are feeling is normal and that they are not alone. For example, ***“This is not unusual. Many patients find it hard to talk about their substance use...”*** or, ***“Talking about substance use can be uncomfortable.”***

▶ **Be transparent.**

Explain that it is important for you to ask specific questions because it is relevant to their treatment. For example, ***“I need to ask you some very specific questions about your use of [XXX] in order to better understand how we can improve your health and keep you safe.”***

▶ **Work collaboratively with patients.**

Remind your patient that recovery is possible and that paths to recovery look different for different people.



# Conversation Starter: Empathy

## ► Address confidentiality concerns honestly.

- Let patients know that you respect their confidentiality and will comply with the protections provided by law for patients. Patients have a right to be informed about any limitations you may face in providing 100% confidentiality.
- Tell patients of any limited instances when you are required by law to report a threat of harm to self or others.

*I want you to know that everything you share with me and that we discuss today is confidential. However, there are some limited exceptions under the [state] law I want to make sure you know and understand. [State's] policy that requires me to report threats of harm to self or others.*



## ► Establish trust and show empathy.

- Actively listen to your patient.
- Engage with your patient in a non-judgmental way.
- Treat your patient with respect and address their substance use disorder as the medical disease that it is.
- Help your patient understand that you intend to connect them to the comprehensive treatment services they might need, and that recovery is possible.



## Want to Know More?

Check out the following links for more information on related topics.

- [Obtaining a waiver](#) to administer buprenorphine for opioid use disorder
- [Diagnosing and treating opioid use disorder](#)
- [Resources for addiction medicine](#)
- [Information and resources on drug overdose prevention](#)

<sup>1</sup><https://www.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/sensitive-topics-lecture.pdf>