

The Humanism Pocket Tool*

version 5.4

Techniques for Clinicians and Trainees



Concept: Your brain is equipped with inborn, automatic, emotional responses biased to protect you from people who *might* be dangerous, infectious or time-consuming. These emotions can sneak up on you. Use the following techniques to adjust your brain and stay humanistic.

1. **Coach yourself toward a caring frame of mind**

For example, tell yourself “You may be frustrated *AND* you can choose compassion.” Or, “Mr. Smith is not himself today.” Or, “You’ve got a strong and compassionate team.” (See 5, 6 and 7, on back of card).

2. **Be warm**

Use your non-verbal behavior—tone of voice, physical proximity, touch, and mirroring patient movements—to reassure a patient that you are not angry, frightened, or disgusted. Begin by comparing your behavior in warm, professional relationships with your behavior with challenging patients. Then, adjust your behavior with patients in the warm direction.

3. **Listen actively and be curious**

Begin with a question like “What brings you here today?” For 3-5 minutes, use only open-ended questions, brief encouragements to continue, restatement, and empathic remarks. Avoid yes/no questions.

4. **Create a vivid vignette**

Use active listening and questions such as “What matters to you?”, “What brings you joy?” and “What gets in the way?” to discover the patient’s aspirations and obstacles. Distill them into a vignette such as “35-year-old Marine Corps veteran studying to be a pastor but haunted by an Iraqi torture chamber.” Tell the patient how you will use the vignette (see below). Read the vignette to the patient and ask what changes you should make. The vignette reassures the patient that you see him or her as a person, not simply a diagnosis.

5. Use the vivid vignette to inspire and coordinate care.

Refer to the patient using the vivid vignette in discussions with colleagues and in the ID or summary section of progress notes. This helps you and your colleagues to see the patient more vividly as a person, and to see your interactions with the patient as part of an evolving story, one in which you may become an important character. As you get to know the patient and the story evolves, update the vignette.

6. During interprofessional meetings, listen actively and appreciate differences.

These two techniques help you understand others' assessments and treatment proposals and thereby create overall treatment plans no one person could design or deliver. Knowing that your team is both willing and effective allows you to remain humanistic with complex patients who would otherwise seem overwhelming (see number 1).

7. Know your colleagues as people

The better you know your colleagues, the better you can see their points of view and the better you can understand their assessments and treatment proposals. Try this: On Monday mornings, check in with some of your team members by asking about their weekend. This will help you know them better.

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Brief description available at: goo.gl/Bnc4cw

Full manual available at: goo.gl/kx3FfE

**For more cards to give to colleagues, send your physical address to: Andrew.Shaner@va.gov or Andrew.Shaner@gmail.com.*