

# Powerful Communication Tools for Successful Acupuncture Practice

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## Abstract

This article presents foundational communication tools that acupuncture practitioners can use to facilitate both successful outcomes in patients' treatment as well as busy, abundant clinics. These tools are explained and summarised as three exemplar scripts: the agenda, the treatment plan and the reschedule.

## Introduction

Communication connects us all. As medical practitioners it can allow us to create trust, relaxation and confidence. It can also create fear, doubt and uncertainty. A lot of acupuncturists, especially upon first beginning their journey into clinical practice, mistakenly create the latter. Oftentimes because practitioners are blindly caught up in their own insecurities, this translates into indirect and timid communication with their patients. Then they are left wondering why their patients do not return for follow-up treatments, complete their treatment plans, or refer other patients. I know all this because this was me. It took me two years of studying communication, engaging in personal growth work and refining my conversations with patients in order to master this skill. Now I know how to communicate with patients so they feel safe, confident and trusting that they are exactly where they need to be. They consistently book follow-up appointments, complete their treatment plans and graciously refer new patients. Learning how to communicate openly, clearly and authentically with your patients is something that any practitioner can learn at any time in their career to create an abundant practice.

indeed last a lifetime if there is clear and confident communication.

There are three powerful scripts that can be used during your patient's first appointment: the agenda, the treatment plan and the reschedule. Together these three scripts create a comfortable, professional and complete experience for your patient. Not only will using these scripts help to fill your schedule, creating the momentum of a plentiful word of mouth practice, it will also educate patients on how acupuncture should be experienced to gain the full benefits of this often-misunderstood medicine.

We begin at the point when you have led your new patient into your treatment room. Typically you would both sit down and the series of consultation questions would begin. Stop right there. Regardless of whether you have prepared your new patient by asking them to read and complete pre-appointment paperwork, they will more often than not arrive feeling nervous, with several unanswered questions. Will it hurt? Where will she needle me? Why is she checking my pulse when I have back pain? Will cupping be part of the treatment? Questions such as these create a non-present patient, which blocks your ability to connect with them. The more you are able to ease the patient's nerves and worries, the more they will be relaxed and open to you. In order to do this, first of all you want to provide your patient an agenda of the treatment session. If the patient knows exactly what will be happening and when, this will reassure and relax them.

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## The first appointment

One of the most important times to effectively communicate to your patients is during the first appointment. It is at this point that the practitioner must lay the foundation for the lifetime of the therapeutic relationship with the patient - which can

## The agenda

After you have sat down, and before the health-related questions begin, set the stage with the first script, the agenda of treatment:

*First we'll sit and talk for awhile. We are going to go over your health history and why you are here. Next I'll take*

*your pulses at your wrists and look at your tongue. These are two diagnostic tools we use in Chinese medicine. And finally we'll do the acupuncture. Generally my patients are on the treatment table for about 30 minutes. It's very relaxing and most of them take a little nap.*

When delivering this script, note the word 'acupuncture' is used intentionally and strategically in place of 'needle'. The general public tends to have childhood experiences of needles embedded in them, and these are generally not pleasant. The less you trigger any type of stress response during the entirety of your time with the patient, the better. Note also the strategic suggestion that the treatment is very relaxing. The majority of new patients will come to their first appointment unfamiliar with the tranquility of acupuncture treatment. By telling them about this, the treatment begins - projecting the desired outcome into their psyche and therefore beginning the physical process of letting go consciously and subconsciously.

### The treatment plan

After your patient interview has been completed, and before the acupuncture begins, the next script should be delivered. The treatment plan script is quite possibly the most important aspect of creating a successful practice - the foundation on which every other interaction in your practice lies. Here is an example of a treatment plan script for acute cases:

*Let me explain to you how acupuncture works. Acupuncture works as a series of treatments. You can never have acupuncture treatments too close together, but you can have them too far apart. It works cumulatively and we want to continue building on your progress at each session. If we treat you today, but then not again until next week, there's a good chance your symptoms will slowly start to creep back, so by the time we treat you again we'll be back at square one because we left too long between appointments. We don't want to get stuck in this see-saw of your symptoms improving, then getting worse, then improving, then getting worse again. We want your symptoms to gradually improve, and improve, and improve. In order to accomplish this, I'll need to see you twice a week for the first one or two weeks. After that, as long as your symptoms are improving and staying at that level of improvement between appointments, we can reduce this to once per week. As long as your symptoms continue to stay stable between your appointments we'll keep treating you once per week, but if they start to creep back again at anytime during that week then I want you to contact me and we'll get you back in the office as soon as possible so we don't lose progress. As the symptoms continue to fade, we'll reduce treatment frequency further, and have you come in every two to three weeks. Once the symptoms are gone then we'll go into 'tune-up' mode: I have all of my patients come in at least once per month for their ongoing 'tune-up' treatments.*

*Basic cases take around five or six treatments, while more chronic and challenging cases can take 10 or more treatments. You haven't had your condition that long, you're young and healthy, so I would expect this to be in the five or six treatment range. We'll know more after we see how your body responds to the first treatment because everyone responds differently, but I wouldn't expect it to take too many treatments. You're likely to notice a difference in your [name of main symptom] from the first treatment, but in order for things to shift more permanently, give it about three or four treatments.*

With chronic cases, explain everything the exact same way, except the final part, which can be substituted with this:

*You've had your condition for quite some time now, so I would expect your case to be more in the ten treatment range so I really wouldn't look for a significant shift in your symptoms until around the sixth treatment.*

***Creating this plan with your patient joins the two of you into one team working together for their benefit.***

With the treatment plan script in place you have made a significant strategic move. This script has far-reaching and positive benefits. Creating this plan with your patient joins the two of you into one team working together for their benefit. Instead of the all-too-familiar rushed and uninformed appointment they may have experienced with their orthodox medical doctor, they will be impacted by the amount of time, compassion and concern you show for their condition. The psychological effect of this is hugely beneficial to their healing, while the understanding of how acupuncture treatment works reduces the chances of them pulling out of the course of treatments too early. With a more knowledgeable patient, your treatment outcomes improve, your patient's conversations with people outside of your clinic about East-Asian medicine will be more accurate, your word-of-mouth referrals spreads further, and all of this results in a busier acupuncture practice for you.

Perhaps the most important part of this script for building and sustaining a successful practice is teaching your patients that everyone should come in at least once per month for 'tune-up' treatments. Not only does this keep your schedule full, it keeps your patients healthy. Prevention is an important aspect of our medicine. Remember: you are not being a pushy salesperson, and you are not selling your patient something of little use. You are a doctor of East-Asian medicine whose entire ideology of health focuses preventing illness and maintaining balance in the body. By using this script you are guiding your patients to follow a treatment plan that you, as their doctor, know will keep them at an optimal

level of health and wellness. We should not wait until something goes wrong, but instead proactively keep our patients healthy. When you explain the treatment plan as thoroughly as this, your patients will understand and will no longer wait until they are sick to seek treatment; they will appreciate the ongoing attention to their state of wellness. When your current patients participate in the continuous care of their tune up treatments all year round, you will find your practice consistently full and find that it is not necessary to constantly work to find new patients. A beautiful relationship is developed with your patients as you grow together over the years of care in health, wellness and success.

### The reschedule

Your final script to complete the first consultation is the reschedule. It is often during the crucial closing minutes of the first appointment that an acupuncturist's uncertainties are most strongly triggered. Lack of confidence can wash over them and nerves take over, leading to indirect communication and awkwardness. Having simple scripts to use in these final moments are helpful to smoothly complete the closure of the appointment, leaving your patient trusting your competence and clear in their intention to continue treatment.

You have already educated your patient about the number of appointments they need as well as the necessary treatment frequency; now is the time to schedule future appointments. You want to stay away from posing this as a question because you have already gotten them on board with the plan via the treatment plan script. If you ask them some version of, 'Do you want to schedule your next appointment?' this can subconsciously trigger questions in their mind along the lines of, 'Do I want to schedule

an appointment? You said I needed an appointment, why are you asking me now?' Although it may seem like an innocent inquiry, such nuances of communication make a big difference. Your patient needs you to lead them at this moment, to which end you can frankly and confidently say, 'Let's schedule your next appointment.' You are not asking. You are not forcing. You are simply stating the next step in the process. If they are a new patient, which requires two appointments in the first week, you can take this lead one step further as follows: 'Let's schedule your next appointment - we'll need to get you back in office in about three or four days.'

### Conclusion

The scripts presented here are foundational communications without which a long-term sustainable acupuncture practice is difficult to achieve. Acupuncturists are often not direct with their patients for fear of creating discomfort. Actually, communicating in a roundabout manner tends to come across as awkward in the practitioner and creates distrust and discomfort in the patient. An open, honest, detailed and candid communication throughout the entire treatment experience creates a powerful connection with patients based on trust and understanding, which both facilitates their healing and a successful acupuncture practice.

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### Yoga transforms the lives of prisoners

A study of 152 volunteers in medium- and high-security prisons in Sweden has found that yoga reduced aggression and antisocial behaviour and improved stress levels, concentration, sleep quality, and physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing. The benefits appear to derive from yoga rather than exercise in general and, according to the authors, are likely to make reoffending less likely. Since yoga shares the same cultivation of body,

mind and breath as practices such as tai chi and qigong, it is likely that these too will demonstrate similar remarkable healing qualities. (Yoga Practice Reduces the Psychological Distress Levels of Prison Inmates. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*).

### Ginger for acute gastroenteritis

Acute gastroenteritis is the second leading cause of death in preschool children globally, and causes more than 1.2 million deaths a year. It is

the dehydration caused by vomiting and diarrhoea that can be fatal and so the finding that ginger root can cut vomiting by 20% is great news. As lead researcher Dr Roberto Berni Canani said, 'We anticipate that the results will have a great impact on future clinical practice and the advice given to parents in the treatment of acute gastroenteritis and could potentially save lives across Europe and the globe.' (Dr Roberto Berni Canani, *European Society of Paediatric Gastroenterology*).