

Hospitalist Dr. Ryan Murphy is in the unique position of having experienced cared during the Covid-19 crisis from both sides – both as a patient’s son and as an attending physician for admitted patients. His experience introduced four ways to break through the compassion wall—the barrier created by the extra precautions COVID-19 requires.

VALIDATE EMOTIONS TO CLOSE THE PHYSICAL DISTANCE



Whether you’re in full protective gear or an ear loop mask, your eyes, body language, and attitude matter. Given these precautions, I try to validate patients’ emotions by telling them that I recognize how scared they must feel. I spend time focusing on their emotions first, instead of diving straight into the medical details. I believe it is easier for patients to listen to the medical analysis if you address their emotions first. Then, I ask, “What is your understanding of what is going on?” Learning what a patient already understands about their care helps me tailor the conversation to their needs.

SHARE THE DECISION-MAKING



One of the hard things about COVID is the unknown. I’ve adopted a mindset similar to other clinical decisions that don’t have clear answers. I embrace shared decision-making. I tell them, “Here are your options, here are the pros and cons of each.” I say, “I would recommend this, or I would prefer that.” Ultimately, you have to be transparent and honest with what we know and what we don’t know. Learn a simple model for shared decision-making: [choice, option, and decision](#). It starts with eliciting what patients already know. Utah’s palliative care physician Paige Patterson shares a [conversation model for serious illness](#).

ANSWER THEIR QUESTIONS



Instead of saying, “Do you have other questions?” I ask, “What other questions do you have?” I ask this question multiple times before I leave the room. I also make sure they have a pen and paper, or their cell phone, to write down additional questions after I leave.

HELP PATIENTS STAY CONNECTED



Make sure that patients can communicate with their family and that they have a phone or an iPad and a charger. You can also set up a video call for patients to communicate with their family through myChart, InTouch or [Zoom](#).