

Patient Empowerment Classes

A Short Guide to Success

Our patient classes so far have been very successful: we've had excellent class retention, seen improved clinical values, and patients report feeling more confident managing their diabetes. Through focus groups and one-on-one interviews with patients, we've identified key themes that contribute to making this class a success.

Here is our advice to implementing these classes, which, we believe, will maximize the learning opportunities and social support that makes patients healthier and happier.

❖ **Make the class experience as interactive as possible.**

- When possible, ask questions and wait for patients to respond before sharing the answer. Use the wrong answers as teachable moments—what do they tell us about how patients understand these topics?
- Set aside time for role play every week, and be sure to ask for new volunteers each time. Patients remember what they play!
- Ask patients how topics relate to their lives. Have they done this before? Do they think they'll be able to? When patients say outloud how they will do something, they are more likely to follow-through with that behavior. This also helps patients learn from each other, and promotes problem-solving and goal setting.
- Take advantage of the props (e.g. glucose wands, carb bucks) and audiovisual tools to facilitate learning. Hands-on is always better than just listening. This is particularly true for reading food labels and making food choices, both with food containers and restaurant menus.
- Bring on the fun flair! Props, videos, and games can alleviate stress and reduce tension or embarrassment. They facilitate a safe and open learning environment, and patients look forward to the fun of class.

❖ **Be sensitive to the pace of the class.**

- Stop the entire class until everyone is up to speed. If one person is confused, it's likely others are too—they're just not sharing it. Patients appreciate that teachers "take the time" to explain it to them slowly and multiple times.

- Explain things twice—twice at the same slide, twice in the same class, and/or during two sessions. Reiteration of concepts is key to helping patients digest the information.
- Ask patients to teach back the concepts they've learned—how well do they understand them? Did they use simple words that help others learn, too?
- Pay special attention to the above suggestions for the fundamental concepts: what is diabetes, how to carb count, what is shared decision-making, etc.

❖ **Prioritize interpersonal connections.**

- Tell patients that this is their new family, and we are here for them. Patients consistently reported how the social support of class—support from teachers and from each other—made them come back to class every week and motivated them to change their behavior at home.
- Talk about yourself. Introduce your role in this class and tell patients why you want to be there. Hearing from their teachers makes patients feel this is a unique opportunity to have a personal relationship with the healthcare team.
- Set aside time for patients to tell their stories.
 - When patients talk about their own experiences with diabetes, they internalize the information learned in class, and begin to translate what it means for their lives.
 - These stories also bring teachable moments: as a facilitator, you can highlight in these testimonials what patients did right, and help them problem-solve what went wrong.
 - Hearing about everyone's experiences creates an environment of social support. This motivates patients' behavior change and brings them back to class each week.
- Assign a greeter for each class. This person meets patients at the door with a smile (and even a hug). The greeter gets them set up with nametags, their binder, and snacks and tells them "we're happy you're here."
- With patients' permission, hand out the phone numbers of class participants towards the end of the ten week series. Encourage patients to call each other if they are running into challenges, or want a friend to share successes.

These strategies will help you create an environment where everyone learns new information and new skills. Collaborative problem-solving is encouraged, and a strong sense of social support emerges. Patients will leave class feeling empowered to live healthy and happy lives.