

"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care"

~ Theodore Roosevelt

The Universal Upset Patient Protocol (UUPP)

By Elizabeth Scala, MSN/MBA, RN
Author, [Stop Nurse Burnout](#)

A single encounter with an upset person can ruin your whole day and leave you ruminating on what you might have done differently for weeks. Here is a simple script to take the stress and confusion out of dealing with upset people in any area of your life.

You have probably not been taught how to deal with upset people effectively -- so when you find yourself faced with an upset person you most likely do one of the two things that will make it worse

- Defend yourself or the person who upset them
- Try to "solve their problem"

These are natural human instincts and they NEVER WORK.

Here is a Communication Protocol that gives you a simple, structured series of questions and phrases to deal with the upset person quickly, easily, empathetically and with elegance and grace.

The Key is "FEELINGS FIRST"

In any conversation with an upset person they need to express their feelings first -- before you will be able to discuss anything else. They are longing to be heard and understood, for someone to care about their situation.

- Your job is to give them an opportunity to do that right up front ... just as soon as we realize they are upset.
- THEN empathize and come to an agreement on what to do next.

If you defend yourself or the person who upset them ... you are literally pouring gasoline on a fire. You will end up with hurt feelings, long delays as you untangle your conversation and you will feel as if you have failed (again) in this difficult interaction.

When you use the UUPP - you will be pleasantly surprised at how quickly the upset person calms down and how easy it is for you to hold your center in the conversation. These may turn out to be your favorite conversations from now on because it is so easy to help the patient feel much, much better.

WARNING:

Any time you are dealing with upset people in a healthcare setting, things can get strange very quickly. Whenever there are strong emotions coming from the patient and/or their friends and family **MAKE SURE YOU ARE SAFE.**

If you sense any danger, the upset person becomes aggressive, abusive or touches you – protect yourself. Leave the room or area. Call for help. Have someone call security or even dial 911 if you need to.

ALWAYS keep yourself safe. The UUPP is for the 90% of upset people who are ultimately consolable and reasonable.

=====

The Universal Upset Patient Protocol

Step 1) You notice this person is upset.

This person can be a patient, however the UUPP works for patients, their family members, co-workers, colleagues, your significant other, children and even complete strangers. Breathe, stick to the script below and see how it instantly defuses what you may have always thought were very difficult encounters.

NOTE:

The UUPP works no matter who or what the person is upset about. It works if they are upset at you, a colleague, the receptionist or unit assistant, their own wife/husband, the tax man ... it doesn't matter. The UUPP works every time.

Regardless of what/who they are upset about ... the upset usually comes in one of two flavors.

- The person is openly and verbally upset. They are loud, potentially rude, sometimes you can even hear them from down the hallway.
- The person is upset and NOT talking. They are "seething". You see the emotions clearly by their body language even if they are not saying anything out loud.

Step 2) Say ... "You sound/look really upset."

DO NOT ignore their obvious signs of upset. If you attempt to just dive in to your work activities and hope you can get away with ignoring their emotions – things will not turn out well. You will waste a lot of time apologizing to them and dealing with an even more extreme emotions unless you deal with their upset here and now.

This simple phrase sets the UUPP in motion.

"You seem/sound/look really upset."

Pick a version that feels comfortable for you. Say it out loud as soon as you notice upset and notice how they respond.

Step 3) The upset person will say one of two things

"You bet I am"

Or

"No I'm not ... I am ANGRY/FRUSTRATED/HURT/SAD/FURIOUS."

They may confirm your suspicion or name a specific emotion.

If they name an emotion other than your label of "upset", there is a part of you that may think you "made a mistake" here. You didn't name the right emotion! Just let that go. The simple act of you commenting on their upset ... caused them to look inside and clarify exactly what they were feeling. That clarification is the first start of them venting and moving forward.

Step 4) You say, "Tell me about It." or "Tell me what happened."

The upset person does not usually hesitate given your invitation. They will take right off into an emotion filled description of what happened. Your job here is simple ... LISTEN. Really listen. Look to understand their viewpoint here. Muster up as much empathy as you can. Breathe. Help them "get it all out of their system".

It rarely takes more than 90 seconds to complete their description.

However, if you find yourself 3 minutes into a heated story and don't have the time to continue listening, take a breath, hold up your hand and move on to Step 5.

Step 5) Look them in the eyes and say, "I am so sorry that happened to you" or "I am so sorry you feel this way".

Listen to their story. Put yourself in their shoes. Imagine this is happening to you and how you would feel in response. From that perspective, you will probably be able to empathize and say the words above authentically.

Step 6) Ask, "What would you like me to do about this ?"

Most of the time, the upset person will have a specific request. Listen carefully as they ask you for what they want. Notice whether or not you are willing - or even able - to honor their request. This is your opportunity to notice your boundaries and prepare for the next step.

NOTE:

Some of the time the upset person will be finished at this step. They simply wanted to be heard, vented their upset and are done now. Thank them for trusting you with their feelings - see step 8 below. You can move on to your clinical issues at this point with a clean slate.

If they are not finished at this point proceed to Step 7.

Step 7) Tell them, "Here's what I am willing to do ... "

If the upset person has asked you to take a specific action - and you are willing to do it - tell them so.

If the upset person's request is NOT something you are willing to do - set your boundaries and communicate them clearly. Tell them you are not willing to do what they request and do not stop there.

Think about what you ARE willing to do that will address their upset and tell them your "counter offer". Ask if your proposal/suggestion works for them. It usually only takes a minute or two to come to an agreement here.

NOTE:

We both know there is a rare individual who is both unreasonable and inconsolable. This is the person who will only let go if you cave in to their unreasonable request.

Hold your ground on what you are willing to do. Be clear on what you are not willing to do. If you cannot reach agreement, ask if the person can set this issue off to the side and allow you to get on with the visit.

Step 8) Thank the upset person for being open with you,

"Thank you for telling me how you really feel ... it is important to me that we be understand each other clearly".

Step 9) MOVE ON

You have now effectively "cleared the air" with this patient and you can move on to the clinical reasons for their visit today.

=====

Even though the full UUPP above has 9 steps, the whole protocol conversation may take only 2-4 minutes

IF YOU DON'T FOLLOW THE UUPP - and either try to defend or fix the problem up front -- you are in for a 20 minute kerfuffle every time ... because people really don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Here's the UUPP again in bullets

- "You look really upset"
- "Tell me about it"
- "I am so sorry that happened to you / you feel that way"
- "What would you like me to do to help you"
- "Here's what I suggest we do next"
- "Thanks for telling me how you are really feeling"

NEXT STEPS:

PRACTICE - PRACTICE - PRACTICE

- Print out this document
- Study it
- Grab a friend who will help you practice by playing the part of the upset person
- PRACTICE until you are comfortable with the steps and phrases
- **USE THE UUPP WITH YOUR NEXT UPSET PERSON**

=====

The Universal Upset Patient Protocol is just one Burnout Prevention Tool from StopNurseBurnout.com. Here are even more options ...

1) Buy the book: "*Stop Nurse Burnout – What to Do When Working Harder Isn't Working*"

This is the first step-by-step self help guide for nurses to prevent burnout for good. It is a complete system to build a more Ideal Career and a much more balanced life.

[Click Here to learn more and get your copy](#) – including an additional 6 Power Tools at the website.

2) Visit StopNurseBurnout.com for additional resources and tools to lower stress, build more life balance and a more Ideal Career

- Stress Management and Burnout Treatment and Prevention
- Nurse Leadership Development
- Nurse Wellness and Engagement Resources

=====

That's all for now. Keep breathing and have a great rest of your day,



Elizabeth

Elizabeth Scala, MSN/MBA, RN
Author, Stop Nurse Burnout
www.StopNurseBurnout.com