

“It’ll Be OK”: The Effects of Supportive Talk on Patient Perceptions of Physicians in Racially Discordant Medical Interactions

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Background: In recent years there has been hopeful interest in using a patient-centered communication style to optimize medical visits. Patient-centered communication is associated with patients’ positive views of their physicians. As a result, having patient-centered communication can influence the degree of patient adherence, which in turn can affect health outcomes. One of several styles that characterize patient-centered communication is for physicians to engage in supportive talk that legitimizes the patient’s perspective and concerns.

Objectives: The main goal of the study was to explore whether supportive talk is associated with patients’ positive views of their physician (i.e., warmth) and the interaction (i.e., patient-centered care, “being on the same team”) in racially discordant medical interactions between Black patients and non-Black physicians. **Methods:** 133 transcripts of patient-physician interactions from an existing longitudinal study of Black patients who interacted with non-Black physicians at a primary care clinic were coded for supportive talk (reassurance, encouragement, comfort) in the current study.

Results: Supportive talk was significantly and positively associated with perceived physician warmth, patient-centered care, and teamness, such that Black patients whose non-Black physicians engaged in more supportive talk reported greater perceived warmth, patient-centered care, and teamness, as compared to patients whose physicians engaged in less supportive talk.

Conclusion: The findings from the current study suggest that physicians may be able to improve patients’ perceptions of them even in racially discordant medical interactions (which is often characterized as less positive than the racially concordant ones) by reassuring, encouraging, and comforting the patients. Thus, the findings further support the importance of training medical students on incorporating patient-centered communication in their practice.