

Partnering with Your Patients, Colleagues, and Community

Presented by Helen Osborne

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Partnering

Partnering is an umbrella term that covers a cluster of concepts.

Partnering with patients embraces informed and shared decision-making, self-management, self-care, patient-centered care, and patient empowerment. The common theme is that the patient is at the center of his or her health care team.

Partnering with colleagues includes team-building, participatory decision-making, brainstorming, and other aspects of group collaboration. Colleagues can be those you interact with each day or people you meet only occasionally or online.

Partnering with the community includes action and advocacy with those outside your usual work environment. Community can include local business leaders, educators, and people working at social service agencies, public libraries, and even the zoo.

It is by partnering and working together that we CAN and DO make a big difference!



Health understanding happens when patients and providers are partners

Partnering with Patients

Patient education is often hard to do. There is a lot of information to teach but patients may not be interested or ready to learn. Healthcare settings can be fast-paced with high expectations and limited resources. And as health educators, we may feel overwhelmed and alone. Partnering with patients can help. Here are some actions you can take:

- **Know your audience, in general.** Begin by getting familiar with the “average” person in your intended audience. This means knowing about literacy level, language, culture, and age. It also means being sensitive to disabilities or emotional issues which may affect how the “average” person understands and uses health information.
- **Tailor communication, in specific.** But no one really is “average.” After you know where to begin, tailor or adapt communication to meet the needs of each individual. This may be drawing pictographs for someone who speaks limited English. Or teaching just one concept at a time to someone who has trouble concentrating. You can also tailor communication by giving resources to learn more.
- **Create a welcoming and supportive environment.** Whether your environment is in a building or somewhere in cyberspace, make sure that is safe, feels private, and encourages thought and reasoned action. As well, set a tone in which people can comfortably ask questions, disagree, or let you know when they don’t understand.
- **Communicate in whatever ways work.** People learn and communicate in a variety of ways. Beyond talking or using written materials, consider other communication strategies like stories, pictures, and metaphors. Incorporate the principles of plain language in all your communication. This includes using words that people already know, teaching ones they need to learn, and presenting information from the other person’s point of view.
- **Confirm understanding.** Communication is only effective when the other person understands. When you meet in person, confirm what people do and do not know. When there are gaps, rephrase not just repeat information. Make sure, as well, that you truly understand what the other person is communicating to you. When creating printed materials, make sure to include people on the writing team who represent your intended audience. Publish only after these readers confirm the written information is useful and understandable.

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Partnering with Colleagues

Brainstorming is one way to partner with colleagues. Here is an example of ways to brainstorm event ideas for Health Literacy Month.

Establish ground rules. Let everyone know why you are meeting (to generate ideas for a Health Literacy Month event). Say how long the session will last (usually an hour is sufficient). Tell how they can help (by coming up with lots of ideas). Explain what will happen after the brainstorming session is over (how decisions will be made). Then agree on brainstorming ground rules such as:

- Go for quantity (the more ideas the better)
- No idea is too wild or silly
- Defer judgment (there are no bad ideas)
- Piggy-back (build on) other ideas
- Use lots of humor

Ask one question. State the vision for the event and the specific objectives. Then ask an open-ended question such as, “If we could devote one day to making this event a reality, what would we do?”

Get lots of answers. Be sure to allow time for people to think. You can do that by giving them a stack of Sticky Notes or index cards and asking them to write one idea per piece of paper. Then set a time limit (perhaps 5 or 10 minutes) and encourage people to write as many ideas as they can without discussion. Reassure them that quantity matters more than practicality.

Combine, sort, and clarify ideas. Once people have lots of ideas, ask them to meet in small groups to combine, sort, discuss, and otherwise clarify what they wrote. They can do this by posting their papers on the wall or an easel. Encourage group members to question each other about what their ideas mean. As a group, people can then combine and cluster ideas that are essentially the same.

Prioritize. Now reassemble the whole group. Let everyone have an opportunity to prioritize what he or she would like to do or see happen. An easy and fun way to do this is by asking people to vote using Sticky Dots or other adhesive symbols to mark their favorite ideas.

Decide what to do. Your brainstorming session will generate many ideas, some of which will be very surprising. Now all that is left is for you and the committee to take those ideas and decide which to implement.

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Partnering with Your Community

Partnering with outside organizations is an excellent way to build community-wide awareness and support. When looking for organizations to form partnerships with to improve health communication, think about groups you know that face challenges similar to yours or share your vision of what needs to be accomplished. For instance:

- **Hospitals, health centers, and outpatient clinics** need to create and maintain effective patient education materials as well as develop programs that will enhance patient adherence to treatment regimens.
- **Public health initiatives** need to put out messages that can be understood by a wide range of audiences.
- **Adult education or family literacy programs** focus their efforts on working with people to develop skills they need to function in their everyday life.
- **Immigrant services organizations** work to help people get beyond language and cultural barriers that can interfere with effective communication.
- **Local safety officials (such as police and fire departments)** might be interested in working with you to improve communication about public health risks.
- **Reference librarians** may share your interest in finding health information written at appropriate reading levels.
- **Cultural organizations** want people to be able to maintain the richness of their cultural heritage without being penalized because others don't understand them.
- **Advocacy groups, faith-based programs**, and other community initiatives strive to have the needs of the people they represent not only heard, but understood.
- **Government departments and services** need to make and implement policies that provide for the well-being of their constituencies.
- **Health professional associations** are focused on finding ways to help their members become better providers. A great resource for health care educators is HCEA!



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Ways to Learn More

Selected articles related to partnering written by Helen Osborne and published in *On Call*. This magazine is published by BostonWorks, a division of the *Boston Globe* and available online at <http://www.boston.com/jobs/healthcare/oncall>

- May 29, 2007. “In Other Words...What Healthcare Settings Can Learn from Zoos about Signage and Wayfinding.”
<http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=5977>
- May, 2007. “In Other Words...When Patients and Providers Talk About Health.”
<http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=5917>
- November/December 2006. “In Other Words...Helping Patients Ask Questions.”
<http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=5179>
- September/October 2006. “In Other Words...Making a Bottom-Line Case for Health Literacy.” <http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=4804>
- March/April 2005. “In Other Words...Listening to Your Audience...How to Get Reader Feedback.” <http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=3766>
- August/September 2004. “In Other Words...Building Health Literacy Programs One Step at a Time.” <http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=3796>
- October 2002. “In Other Words...Health-Literacy Partnerships. . . Working Together Can Make a Difference.” <http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=3790>
- November 2001. “In Other Words...Can They Understand? Testing Patient Education Materials With Intended Readers.”
<http://www.healthliteracy.com/article.asp?PageID=3811>

Other resources include:

- Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, 2007. “*What Did the Doctor Say?: Improving Health Literacy to Protect Patient Safety*.”
- Kaner S, 1996. *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Osborne H, 2007. *Health Literacy Month Handbook: The Event Planning Guide for Health Literacy Advocates*. Natick, MA: Health Literacy Consulting.
- Osborne H, 2004. *Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message*. Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett.
- Surowiecki J, 2004. *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*. New York: Doubleday.



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Recognized as an expert in health literacy, Helen Osborne M.Ed., OTR/L helps health professionals communicate in ways patients and their families can understand. She is president of her own business, Health Literacy Consulting, based in Natick, Massachusetts. Helen is also the founding director of Health Literacy Month – a global campaign to raise awareness about the importance of understandable health information.

Helen speaks, consults, and writes about health literacy. She is in her ninth year as a columnist for the *Boston Globe's On Call* magazine, writing about patient education and healthcare communication. She is also the author of several books, including the award-winning *Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message* published by Jones & Bartlett. Her newest publication is the *Health Literacy Month Handbook: The Event Planning Guide for Health Literacy Advocates*. In addition, Helen produced and hosts *Health Literacy Out Loud*, a series of audio interviews with people making a difference in how health information is communicated.

To learn more about Helen's work, please visit the Health Literacy Consulting website at www.healthliteracy.com.