



# Technologist Engagement, Part 1: Creating Positive Patient Interactions With Effective Communication

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Mammography technologists are charged with acquiring high-quality images and calming patient anxiety while creating a compassionate interaction based on trust and effective communication. The past year has brought challenging and unforeseen circumstances for breast imaging practices and patients. Along with these challenges, many facilities have been experiencing staff shortages while trying to manage overloaded schedules. Now, more than ever, it is especially important for technologists to remain motivated in their work and focused on creating positive experiences for their patients. The unique opportunity of enhancing a patient's experience begins with mammography technologists. An enriched patient experience can play a key role in determining whether the patient returns for annual screening and/or follow-up examinations. This goal can be accomplished through effective communication.

Two essential aspects of effective communication in which technologists play a key role are the patient-technologist relationship and the technologist-radiologist relationship. In the first of this 2-part series, we discuss the patient-technologist relationship.

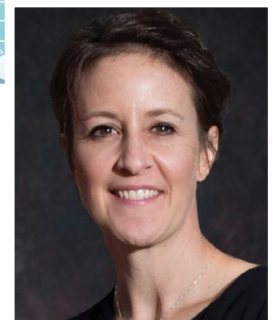
Optimizing a patient's experience begins with effective communication between the technologist and patient. Because of the pandemic, some patients may now be fearful of entering a facility where they once felt safe and comfortable. To achieve optimal image quality and increase patient confidence, it is essential for the technologist to create a positive and welcoming environment.

- *Recognize the patient and introduce yourself:* A patient's first clinical interaction is usually with the technologist. Studies show that individuals have a mere 7 seconds to make a first impression.<sup>1</sup> The technologist's introduction can set the tone for the patient's perception of the upcoming experience. Introduce yourself by name and tell your patients you will be taking care of them today. Along with an initial introduction, recognize and acknowledge your patients. Simply walking next to patients and encouraging conversation while accompanying them into the examination room can make them feel respected.
- *Smile:* Smile when greeting your patients. Even under your mask, a smile can be visible in your eyes. Smiles release chemicals in your brain that fight off stress, relax your body, and lower heart rate. Smiles can lift your mood, change the tone of your voice, and increase positive thoughts. Each time you smile at someone, it encourages a similar response.<sup>2,3</sup>

- *Create a calming space:* Create a space that is inviting and clean. Produce an examination room free from clutter, play soft music in the background, or provide visual stimulation with wall art.
- *Be kind and genuine:* Try to see the situation from the patient's perspective.

Creating a positive and welcoming environment must be accompanied by effective communication. Effective communication requires active listening, using appropriate body language, and responding reflectively with mindful word choices and carefully developed, scripted responses.

- *Active listening:* Active listening requires the technologist to remain attentive when a patient is speaking. It allows technologists to maintain focus and suspend judgements while viewing the circumstance from the patient's perspective with an empathetic eye. Pausing before entering the examination room will help technologists achieve optimal active listening by gaining a mindset free of current stressors occupying their thoughts.
- *Body language:* Technologists are conditioned to work quickly and efficiently, but patients shouldn't feel as though their examination is rushed. Technologists can create a positive patient interaction by maintaining attentive eye contact, using open body language, slowing down, and focusing on quality imaging. Using hand gestures and physically showing the patient what is needed will assist in compliance. This is particularly helpful when interacting with patients who speak a different language, are hearing impaired, or have difficulty understanding instruction.
- *Reflectively responding:* Reflectively responding will keep the technologist's focus on listening to the patient and ensuring the patient feels understood. This means that the technologist's perspective on a situation is not shared with the patient. When a patient has finished their narrative, paraphrasing what the technologist has heard will demonstrate understanding.



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**What advice would you give to other patients who are going through the diagnosis and treatment process for breast cancer?**

**LM:** Listen to your doctors. I dragged my feet with scheduling the biopsy because everything kept coming back benign. I, like most people, thought it couldn't happen to me and was confident the biopsy would be benign. Therefore, I was hesitant to get a biopsy and delayed it for a couple of months.

Also, listen to your body. I second-guessed myself when I still felt a lump following surgery. While it was calcifications and not the lump that led to my diagnosis, the radiologist would not have found the calcifications had it not been for my persistence in getting the lump reevaluated. I'm very fortunate that I followed through on both fronts because my outcome may have turned out differently had there been a greater delay in diagnosis.

Finally, trust your gut. Things tend to happen fast. You have to make a lot of decisions quickly that may affect the rest of your

life. Maybe some sacrifices need to be made. Ultimately, if given the option, choosing between lumpectomy and mastectomy is a very personal decision. Take the time to do your homework and talk to people who have also been in your situation. There are great resources and communities that you can reach out to as well. Once you have as much information with which you feel comfortable, my advice is to trust your gut and don't look back.

**MM:** I tell my patients that being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021 is very different than it was in 2001. We have gotten very good at treating this form of cancer and a lot of it stems from an emphasis on early detection.

Liza was not yet of screening age, but she did not rest on a new symptom. She was persistent in her follow-up, and because of that her cancer was diagnosed early enough for her to be healthy today, almost 6 years later.

**Member-in-Training Column: Looking Forward: Breast Imaging Fellowship Applications for the 2023-2024 Academic Year (continued from page 14)**

VIRTUAL INTERVIEW	IN-PERSON INTERVIEW
Less expensive (no travel or lodging)	Absorb the program's culture and location
Less time commitment (no travel time); can allow for better balance of family and work responsibilities (service coverage, call, Core studying)	Opportunities to interact with the program's radiologists, staff, and trainees in formal and informal activities
Comfort during the interview in one's own home environment	Become familiar with the physical space you would work in
Ability to apply and interview more broadly (less time commitment for each interview)	Explore the program's city and neighborhood

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- **Key words:** Identifying and using key words or phrases during patient interactions will also promote a higher level of patient understanding and responsiveness. Rather than using the word *pain*, technologists should use words or phrases such as *discomfort*, *pressure*, or *somewhat uncomfortable*. These key words should be accompanied by phrases that acknowledge the patient's feelings. If a patient mentions negative previous experiences, the technologist should acknowledge those experiences and explain how this examination will be different. For example, the technologist could say, "I'm sorry you had that experience previously. Let me tell you how this is going to be different. This time, we are going to work together to get the best images possible." The technologist's response should be simple, concise, and genuine.
- **Scripted responses:** Imaging departments can create scripted responses to commonly asked patient questions. Scripts should be developed and supported by the breast imaging leadership team and used consistently by the staff. Scripts for introductions, what patients can expect during the examination, how and when patients will receive results, and the difference between digital

mammography and digital breast tomosynthesis are a few examples. Scripted responses for diagnostic callbacks, appointment reminders, and postbiopsy check-in calls can also be extremely useful. Additionally, scripts for screening guidelines and answers to patient questions about guidelines are essential. Effective scripts should contain simple and concise terminology that patients can understand.

Imaging technologists play a very important role in establishing a positive relationship with the patient. This relationship begins with effective communication centered around compassion and empathy.

**References**

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