Importance of Telemedicine and Patient Eye Contact

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Eye contact is an incredibly important communication tool. Yet, we don't learn about making eye contact in school unless we're learning public speaking skills. It relays one's interest in the other party and the conversation, empathy, trust, and emotional connection. Eye contact can lead to more satisfaction in both service and people they interact with, regardless of the field.

Lisa Gualtieri, a professor at the Health Communications Program at Tufts Medical School, has noted that a lack of eye contact in exam rooms is a major issue. Providers asking about abuse and safety without even looking at a patient not only removes the ability for empathy but for real connection.

It's not surprising — strong eye contact has been shown to be one of nine main nonverbal communication tools between providers and patients. When that's lacking — whether in-person or via telemedicine — people, like Gualtieri, feel unheard and unseen.

For many patients using telemedicine, good eye contact creates a more intimate setting. This becomes all the more important in virtual settings where we lack physical closeness. It signals that providers are paying attention. We so often default to multitasking mode while using technology that eye contact becomes integral to showing patients you're completely here for and focused on them.

From a technical aspect, there are setups that make eye contact easier to achieve over video. A 2007 study found that the further an individual was from the screen, the easier it was for them to appear to make eye contact. An "eye gaze angle of 7 degrees" was found to be most optimal. That said, providers may have to adjust for oddly placed camera units. Providers may need to focus on a specific point behind the patient in order to appear to make eye contact. Additionally, having specifically-sized monitors and cameras can make it easier to convey eye contact.

It's important to note, too, that patients also struggle with this. Most millennials have the hang of it — it's how we keep in touch with our loved ones around the world. For people who aren't as technologically savvy, it takes a while to get the hang of it.

Of course, eye contact is only one piece of the puzzle. Adequate audio equipment, internet connection, and preparing for the appointment are also important.

Using other non-verbal communication methods is key, too. Smiling, laughing, body language, and engaging conversation help patients feel more at-ease. Even more than that, they all combine with eye contact to contribute to an ideal patient experience — one where they feel valued and heard. It's no surprise, but this kind of environment allows patients to listen to suggestions and instructions better, too.

At Carbon, we have an integrated approach. We want to provide patients a choice in their care that is convenient, reliable, and comforting. Our vision is that a patient would have an on-going relationship with their providers via a combination of in-clinic and

virtual care visits. To accomplish this goal, we work with clinicians who provide amazing quality of care.

Our telemedicine software is smartphone and tablet-based, making it easily accessible to most patients. It's also integrated into our EHR platform, meaning everyone involved has access to records. On top of that, the patient and clinician can use Carbon's telemedicine service as easily if they were Facetiming with friends and family. That familiarity and ease-of-use combines with empathic providers to create a more personable communication environment where patients feel as cared for as possible.

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