

Cultivating Your Communication Skills

Learning Objectives:

1. Discuss barriers and motivators for taking new communication skills home.
2. Provide a framework for thinking about the process of developing new skills.
3. Review resources available for support.

Returning to your home institution after spending four intensive days working on communication skills can be exciting but also daunting. Most fellows wonder how they can continue working on their own skills when they are back at home, outside of a retreat that is totally devoted to teaching and learning. In this module, we have collected some lessons we have learned from fellows attending previous retreats, and have added some salient points from the educational literature.

As with any new skill, the communication skills you have been exposed to this week will need to be practiced. Initially, trying out new skills can take some work and you may feel deliberate, and sometimes awkward, as you try different strategies and skills learned here. You may feel self-conscious at first. This is a normal, expected stage in learning new skills. With continued, deliberate practice, these skills will start to feel easier, more fluid, and you will have more confidence. You will find your own words, your own ways of presenting big issues to patients, and you will start to feel good at these skills. Eventually, you will become comfortable enough that you can teach these skills, and become a role model for your peers and colleagues, and the skills will seem like second nature.

We do recommend that you choose one thing to work on at a time. Trying to practice everything simultaneously can be discouraging, especially at the beginning. Once you feel like you've gotten good at one particular thing, use the modules to remind yourself of new things you want to try.

Previous fellows have told us that they get a great deal of satisfaction from communicating better, and that they get positive feedback from patients, family members, and colleagues. And we know from the educational literature that if you can experience the new skills 'working' you will be more likely to use them the next time around. Through this process of patient reinforcement, we expect (and hope) that you will also achieve more satisfaction with your work.

Table 1. Framework for Experience of Learning a New Skill.

LEVEL OF LEARNING	STEPS IN PROCESS	YOUR EXPERIENCE
Novice	Practice	Feels like work, sometimes awkward
Skilled	Deliberate	Feel yourself as competent
Role Model	Mastery	Skills feel like second nature

Pearls

- Celebrate your successes.
- Take credit for your work. If you've done a great job, don't brush it off as 'nothing'.
- Focus on one new skill at a time.

Resources

Most fellows experience some barriers to practicing communication skills when they return home. But as an Oncotalk alum, you have a number of resources. We encourage you to draw on these resources for support, troubleshooting, and staying motivated.

- **Faculty Mentor:** You will hear from your faculty mentor via email within one week, at one month, and again at 6 months. You should feel free to draw on this person as a resource and support as you move through the stages from novice to skilled physician.
- **Peers:** You have a cohort of 19 other fellows, and a growing cohort of Oncotalk alums, who have experienced the course and the process of re-entry back to clinic and work of fellowship. You can call on these peers as you encounter challenges or experience successes.
- **Modules:** The teaching modules that form the Oncotalk curriculum have key points outlined and helpful references included. You can draw on these materials as you move back into your fellowship work and clinical practice.