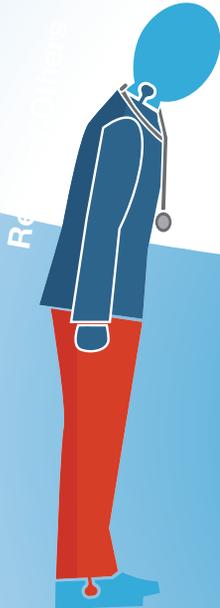


The Five Fundamentals of Civility for Physicians

#1: Respect Others and Yourself

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“...respect is like air. As long as it’s present, nobody thinks about it. But if you take it away, it’s all that people can think about.”

Crucial Conversations¹



THE MARCH 2014 ONTARIO MEDICAL REVIEW FEATURED AN INTRODUCTION TO “THE FIVE FUNDAMENTALS OF CIVILITY FOR PHYSICIANS,” A SERIES OF ARTICLES THAT EXAMINES THE IMPACT OF INCIVILITY IN THE HEALTH CARE ENVIRONMENT, AND STRATEGIES TO FOSTER CIVIL BEHAVIOUR. THE “FIVE FUNDAMENTALS” REFLECTS ON THE NEED FOR RESPECT, AWARENESS, COMMUNICATION, SELF-CARE, AND RESPONSIBILITY — IN THE WORKPLACE AND BEYOND. THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMONSTRATING RESPECT FOR OTHERS AND ONESELF.

Respect and civility are intertwined. It’s easier to interact with others in a civil fashion when we view them with respect. And civil behaviour conveys our respect while fostering the same from those with whom we live and work. Civility, as a means of demonstrating respect, engages people in their work.² Respect can mean many things, but here we are considering the way we regard ourselves and others. To respect is to recognize a sense of worth, to hold in esteem desired or admired qualities, and to accept and acknowledge the intrinsic value of oneself and others.

Respectful relationships are fundamental to worker engagement, high-

quality job performance, and, therefore, in the health care sector, the highest quality of patient care.^{3,4} So, if respect is fundamental to civility, important questions arise: Is it possible to respect everyone? Is it possible to convey respect to everyone? What is the role of self-respect?

Respect For Those We Know And Like

It’s easy to respect people we admire. Our good friends, colleagues with whom we are comfortable, mentors and others we know well, and like, have already earned our positive regard. With them we have built up a store of social

“capital.” Even so, we need to be careful not to let our guard down with these colleagues — at least not too often. And there are everyday ways that we can demonstrate our respect for them that enhance civility in our interactions. These considerations are mostly related to maintaining healthy interpersonal etiquette and boundaries.

- Be present. When in conversation with others, pay attention, listen and consider putting the smartphone aside whenever possible.
- Everyone needs personal space — physical and psychological. Maintain an appropriate distance when conversing with others, and don’t pry

or divulge too much about yourself uninvited. Make space for others to speak and contribute.

- Maintain professional dress and grooming. Ratty garb, greasy hair and body odour are not cool!
- Be mindful of time and timeliness. Arriving and leaving on time tells others that their time is as important as your own.
- Consider the feelings and needs of others. As Forni says, pass both the salt and the pepper when you are only asked to pass the salt!⁴

Respect For Those We Don't Know Well

There are ways to demonstrate respect for people we really don't know, or don't know well. These may be colleagues with whom we seldom work, or the many other workers who provide the range of services vital to the proper functioning of any workplace. Respecting them offers them inclusivity — a civil thing to do. People need to feel that they belong.

- Acknowledge them. Make eye contact. Smile.
- Learn their names — and address them by name.
- Engage in friendly conversation from time to time.
- Learn more about their role and duties within the organization.
- Invite their opinions when appropriate, listen carefully, and express appreciation towards them.

Special mention needs to be made regarding power imbalance and workplace relationships. I was once invited to present a series of lectures on disruptive behaviour in physicians to a group of doctors in the United States. A dermatology resident functioned as my host and he drove me from my hotel to the meeting. I asked about his interest in physician behaviour and why he chose dermatology as a specialty. He explained that plastic surgery had been his primary interest, but he couldn't abide by the disrespectful culture he encountered in his training. The last straw, he said, was the day that his attending surgeon, displeased with something he (the resident) had done, leaned across the operating table and

head-butted him. The resident decided to switch programs!

Leiter reports that uncivil behaviour from individuals of higher status directed towards those who are subordinate has a greater negative impact compared to such behaviour between peer co-workers.⁵ Even unintended, if thoughtless, slights can convey disrespect and cause harm. And if intended? I am not aware of any research that supports shaming as an effective teaching or workplace engagement strategy.

Respect For Those With Whom We Don't Agree

When thinking about people with whom we don't agree, or perhaps those with opinions or values that we don't share, it gets more interesting. Maybe we don't identify with those perspectives, or even approve of them. And perhaps, in some cases, these are the physician leaders to whom we report. Even if we can't support their choices, can we still demonstrate respect for them? Here are some suggestions to consider:

- Assume positive intent. Generally, in any medical workplace, everyone is working towards the same goal: positive outcomes for patients.
- Seek to understand other perspectives by listening carefully and thoughtfully. Find common ground and identify with that. Consider that colleagues and co-workers from other cultures, generations, and even gender are inclined to see things differently.
- Engage in assertive, but courteous, discussion that enables expressions of support or dissent to be heard.
- Remember and value the fundamental humanity and worth as individuals that these colleagues and co-workers possess as members of our community.
- Respect the established systems and roles that govern and guide our work and our profession. Disdain for health care administration or regulation and scorn for its leaders is uncivil and unhelpful. If change is the goal, healthy participation, strategic advocacy, and sound leadership are the routes to take.

Civility Towards Those We Aren't Able To Respect, And The Role Of Self-Respect

Perhaps the greatest challenge arises when dealing with others who have bullied us, or hurt us in some way. What place does respect have when interacting with others who appear to have acted without respecting us? Can we still choose civility? My assertion is that civility, even in this situation, is preferred to incivility — even if not everyone will agree. Self-respect is an important component of civil interactions with others in all circumstances, but in this instance, it is key.

- Consider how you wish your behaviour to be perceived by others. More than once I have heard doctors who call the OMA Physician Workplace Support Program (PWSP) for help say, "I don't want to be that guy!"
- Thinking back at the end of the day, reflecting on your behaviour when interacting with these individuals, how might you feel about yourself — especially if you chose incivility?
- Understand the steps that can and should be taken from a procedural perspective in dealing with someone whose behaviour towards you in the workplace is hurtful and unacceptable: gossip, disparaging remarks in clinical notes, email or the press, and threats of retribution, are not among them!
- Show leadership in demonstrating the kind of assertive, but courteous, communication and regard for others that you wish to be modeled in your medical community and culture. Others will respect and emulate that.
- Demonstrate self-respect and compassion by seeking advice and personal support should you find yourself feeling distressed or victimized by the behaviour of others in the workplace.

These are easy tips to offer, but challenging to act upon when emotions run high. Furthermore, the "gap" between demonstrating civil behaviour towards another in the absence of feeling respect for them can be draining. It is necessary to be self-aware and "other"-aware in these circumstances,

and excellent communication skills are a must. High-quality self-care and resiliency practices will also help in these circumstances. We will look at these as fundamentals of civility in the next few articles.

Humility

The culture of medicine has bred a style of aggressive self-assurance in a good number of its practitioners that can be interpreted as arrogance. Many of the physicians referred to the Physician Workplace Support Program see themselves as heroic champions for patients and health care improvement. They launch themselves vociferously and belligerently against individuals and systems, speaking their “truth,” heedless of those they trample upon in the process. Convinced that their own system of values is unassailable, they judge the motives of others to be suspect. Despite the positive intent of these often amazing and accomplished

individuals, their approach is seldom respectful of the needs, status and opinions of others. Arrogance does not convey respect and is not civil — but humility does and usually is.

A humble person has an open mind, recognizes his or her own limitations, and is willing to consider other ways of being, thinking and behaving. A leader who is humble will understand the appropriate use of the power his or her status confers. Humility allows for apology when needed. Even a modicum of humility in our manner can convey respect for others, engage co-operation, and help us effectively reach the very same goals that a more forceful approach demands, but fails, to achieve.

Can respect and humility be taught and learned? I don’t know for sure, but as a colleague once said to me: “The invitations will keep on coming!”

Respect for others and oneself is at the heart of a caring and civilized profession. Choose civility. ■

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