

Getting the Most Out of Your Doctor – Make Sure You Are Heard and Understood

by Ann Gerhardt, MD

Doctors are not clairvoyant. They can't read minds and their physical exam and high- or low-tech tests don't detect disease 100% accurately. They also hear like everyone else – within the framework of their own thoughts and experience. You may say one word which is heard as another – “no energy” might be interpreted as sleepy, depressed, anemic, lazy, malnourished, heart failure or stressed, when what you really mean is your brain hasn't been able to get up and go since starting the new medication.

A doctor's specialty influences how he/she interprets your words. Your complaint of “I'm losing weight because I can't eat” may be assumed to be anorexia nervosa if the doctor is a psychiatrist, a throat tumor if the doctor is an ENT, inability to swallow if the doctor is a neurologist, gut disorder if the doctor is a gastroenterologist, a cancer if the doctor is an oncologist, and on and on – a good reason to start with a primary care doctor, who *presumably* considers all body systems.

Your doctor needs you to be as specific and accurate with your history and words as possible. Then encourage the doctor to talk and ask follow-up questions to tease apart the details that lead to a diagnosis. Good doctors base at least 50% of an initial diagnostic impression on your words, so make sure you are hearing back from him/her an accurate reflection of what you said. While it may look impressive for a doctor to hear a few words and make an authoritative diagnosis, don't be beguiled into assuming that it is always right or based on your real symptoms.

Pay attention to the doctor's response. Does the doctor's response sound like he/she really grasps what you feel? Does the physical exam focus *at least* on your body parts of concern? Do his/her questions elaborate on what you said *and* go beyond to things you haven't considered? Does the diagnosis seem to account for all your concerns?

Most of the time you will have something that neatly fits a diagnostic box that readily occurs to your doctor. But humans are all guilty of jumping to conclusions without really hearing what was said. To make sure that you were heard: 1) listen carefully to the doctor's diagnosis and plan; 2) Repeat what you think you heard to verify you got it; 3) Ask if the diagnosis explains all of your symptoms, listing them again succinctly; and 4) Ask when you can expect to be better and what happens next if the first plan doesn't help or if you get worse.