
The Script

For MCW Pharmacy School Preceptors

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Help Me With This Difficult Conversation



Engaging in a crucial or difficult conversation is an inevitable aspect of professional life including preceptor-learner relationships. This blog posting offers a summary of the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High* with a focus on preceptor-learner interactions and navigating challenging dialogues.

These dialogues involve two or more people engaged in discussions where the stakes are high, opinions differ, and emotions run deep. Topics may include absenteeism, missed opportunities, poor communication, unsafe practice, disrespectful behavior or speech, or defensiveness during feedback sessions.

Ideally, this difficult conversation takes place face-to-face. Dialogue is important, and it is vital to have a free flow of meaningful ideas between two people and an honest, open expression of opinions, shared feelings, and articulations of theories.

Why are these discussions so difficult? None of us wants to be the “bad guy,” cause hurt feelings, or harm a relationship. We may not know what to say or how to act when we are under pressure, or when the learner acts defensively. These conversations are uncomfortable. There is also a high risk that the more crucial the conversation, the more likely it will be handled poorly. Thus, planning is essential and anticipating potential issues and even rehearsing your approach may be helpful.

Preparation is key:

- Determine your goals and the outcome you hope to have. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish by the end of the conversation.
- Ensure your intentions are good and consider the learner’s perspective. Hear what they have to say and assume their intentions are good as well.
- Manage your emotions and have a plan to conduct a smooth meeting.
- Identify the problems that led to the meeting. Avoid addressing all the issues at one meeting and choose the most serious.
- Be mindful of triggers, so you stay calm, remove defensiveness, and avoid feeling intimidated by the learner.
- Once prepared, initiate the conversation in a private space. Depending on the topic, it may be helpful to include another pharmacist to document the conversation.

During the conversation:

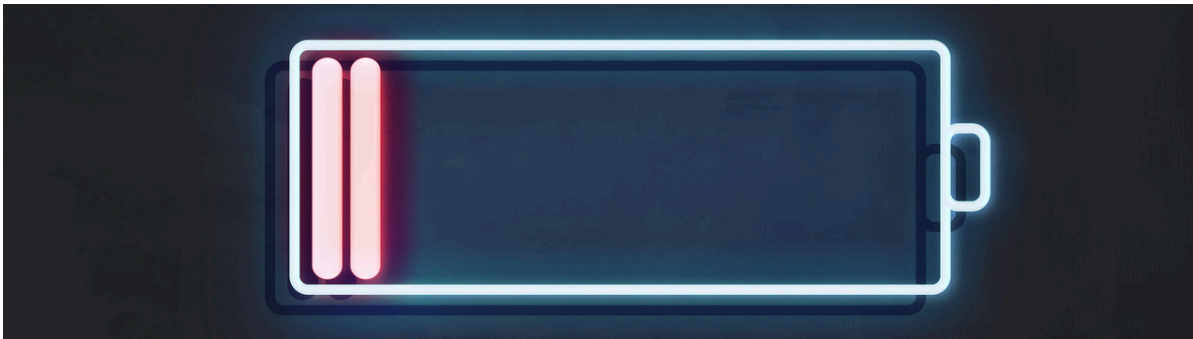
- It is crucial to maintain a focus on learning.
- Use open-ended questions to ascertain the circumstances leading to the issue.
- Notice what is happening around you and make sure the conversation is staying in a safe psychological space.
- Keep emotions in check and help the learner do the same. Tone, how the conversation is set up, and body language all play a part here.
- Clearly state your mutual purpose, look for points of agreement and, in an unemotional way, state what you see and how you want the conversation to end.
- Encourage the learner to stay in the dialogue by avoiding defensiveness or silence. The goal is to stay in the ‘sweet spot’ of shared meaning to ensure both parties understand each other’s perspective.
- If emotions escalate, restate your intentions, and bring the conversation back to a constructive place.

Help Me With This Difficult Conversation (continued)

Action plan:

- Offer assistance to resolve the problem and find a solution together.
- Plan and outline expectations for the remainder of the rotation.
- End with an agreed upon follow-up plan. Ensure everyone knows who does what, by when, and consequences for future issues.
- Encourage the learner.

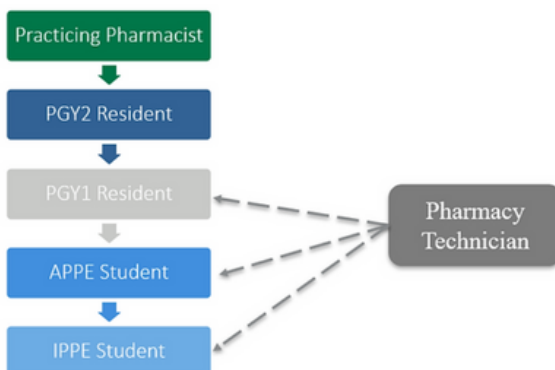
Not every rotation is free of difficult conversations. Patient care should never be compromised for the sake of peace with a learner. Use the learner's orientation as a time to set expectations for the rotation and establish boundaries. Learners need to be accountable and aware of their progress, including violations of expectations. Contact the Office of Experiential Education with concerns or for assistance at any time.



Burnout Prevention (Part 2 of 5): Effective Workload Management

One way to manage workload while precepting a student learner is to apply a layered learning model to your practice. Everyone is probably familiar with some variation of the layered learning model. With this style of learning and precepting, under the guidance of the senior or practicing pharmacist the pharmacy residents take the active leadership role in preparing and planning the rotation experience for the learners. This could include the resident creating the student calendar, identifying topic discussions and opportunities for projects.

Benefits to this model include creating a comfortable learning environment for the student with someone who was recently in their position, and it exposes the learner to the skills they will need for themselves to one day be residents. The residents gain experience in teaching and build their confidence in their advanced clinical skills and knowledge. While overseeing the resident and learner, the practicing pharmacist is exposed to new ideas and perspectives, and the delegating of precepting duties allows more time for administrative work and preceptor development opportunities.



This is not a one-size-fits-all model and can be adjusted to fit almost any practice setting. For example, there may be settings where a technician is playing a large role in precepting. This could be especially true with a learner who, for example, has limited or no prior pharmacy experience. The technician can provide an example for patient care interactions, reinforcement of operational processes, or exposure to clinical services such as vaccinating, med histories, or initiation of CMRs or MTM services.

Burnout Prevention (Part 2 of 5): Effective Workload Management (Continued)

Preparing for your learner's arrival

is another way to manage workload, build resiliency and avoid burnout. For example, what are your "If I Had Time" projects? Consider maintaining a list of project ideas that not only help you or your practice site but can be utilized if your student needs to work independently for a while. Perhaps you are unexpectedly absent a day or the learner needs to make up a missed day due to interviews. Maybe you need to pivot with where your learner is at and have something more or less challenging for them. Having this prepared list alleviates scrambling for ideas at the last minute, avoids stress for you and unnecessary downtime for the learner, and provides an opportunity to make a positive impact on your practice site.

Finally, it is ok to

take time off periodically

from precepting. Perhaps you have had back-to-back learners for a long time, or your home life is especially busy (you may coach or have a kid in a spring sport for example); your practice site has had a recent staff turnover or someone is out on leave; you've just had a difficult learner, or you yourself are a new practitioner and you need more time to get settled in to your role. In this last example, it might be a good opportunity to co-precept with someone else. Whatever the case may be, it is ok to say, "I'm taking a break this block, but I'll take a student the following block."

Use this break as a chance to refresh and reset. It is also an ideal time to take advantage of preceptor development opportunities. The Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin (PSW) has an entire series on their website devoted to preceptor development, covering a wide variety of topics including precepting techniques, models for giving feedback, suggestions for structured learning with trainees, and tips for incorporating well-being and mindfulness into pharmacy practice. Bringing these new ideas and the above tips into your pharmacy practice are just a few ways to help manage workload, build resiliency, and avoid burnout.



Preceptor Spotlight: Derek Hsu, PharmD, MBA Froedtert Menomonee Falls Hospital

What do you want other preceptors to know about you?

Hi All! My name is Derek Hsu, and I currently serve as a clinical pharmacist at Froedtert Menomonee Falls Hospital. I have been with Froedtert Health (and precepted MCW School of Pharmacy students) since 2016, which briefly overlapped my 11-year stretch as a pediatric clinical pharmacist at Children's Wisconsin. I graduated from Drake University College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences with my PharmD/MBA in 2007. I'm Wisconsin born and raised by way of Whitefish Bay and Delafield and obsess over all things Wisconsin sports (Go Pack, Bucks and Brewers!).

What rotations do you precept?

I precept APPE students on their Acute Care and required Hospital (Central Pharmacy) rotations.

Why did you choose pharmacy?

I have had a rooted interest in health and medicine for as long as I can remember. Surprisingly, however, when it came time to consider possible career choices heading into college in 2000, I was at a bit of a standstill. After conferring with my family, I took a pharmacy technician role at Children's Wisconsin. I spent the next 18 years of my professional life at Children's Wisconsin as a technician, intern and pharmacist working alongside some of the best providers, nurses, mentors and friends.

Pharmacy also runs in my family. My father, Philip Hsu, was a pharmacist and part of the Froedtert family for nearly 15 years. I was afforded so many unique opportunities as a child watching my father in his work element. These experiences instilled a lot of that aforementioned interest in healthcare. Much of who I am, at and away from the workplace, comes from observing, firsthand, what it takes to be a respected and successful professional.

Why did you become a preceptor?

Working primarily as a 2nd/3rd shift pharmacist prior to my start at Froedtert Menomonee Falls Hospital, opportunities for student learners were few and far between. Whenever student learners did join me on PMs, I always found myself enjoying the impartment of clinical knowledge in addition to "meeting and greeting" the future of our profession. Not long after joining the team at Froedtert, I knew I would take advantage of all opportunities to precept students. Along the way, I've been able to meet some incredibly bright minds and, more importantly, wonderful people.

What advice do you have for new preceptors?

Some of the best advice I received as a young preceptor is to consider yourself a learner as much as the student you are precepting. It takes time to develop your teaching style and learn how to foster a positive learning environment. I am 8 years in as a preceptor and continue to tweak the methods by which I teach on a rotation-by-rotation basis. Learning as a young preceptor also involves understanding and rectifying constructive criticisms from your students. These criticisms can be the key to unlocking and establishing a rotation that students look forward to experiencing.

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