7 WAYS TO

MOTIVATE PATIENTS

BY WILLIAM ESTEB
Are You Sure You Want to Motivate Patients?

Before you get carried away with sticks and carrots, you want to ask yourself if you really want to get sucked into motivating patients or anyone else for that matter.

Even the most perfunctory reading of a dictionary reveals that “motivate” means to “supply a reason for doing something” or to “stimulate someone’s interest in or enthusiasm for doing something.” In other words, getting some other volitional creature to value your purpose over theirs and do what you want them to do.

Sounds like hard work to me. Exhausting, actually. And unsustainable if you have any hope of providing quality, compassionate chiropractic care spanning an entire career, while having enough energy left over for yourself and your own interests.

Outside-in.

Motivating others is an outside-in process. Like taking a drug. And like all outside-in processes, if you want to maintain any sort of stasis, you must continue the outside-in process. In other words, you have to keep taking the drug or, in this case, continue the incentives to see the effect you want.
In chiropractic, patient motivation is a rather blunt instrument that manifests in several unattractive ways:

1. Financial inducements (free spinal examinations and annual care plans)
2. Use of your social authority to nag patients into compliance
3. Shaming patients (“Do you want “fix care” that brilliant, attractive patients choose, or a “patch job” that stupid patients choose?”)
4. Scare tactics (early death, more expensive and difficult to correct if neglected)
5. Endless recalls

Needless to say, your overtures, even if justified as being in the patient’s so-called best interest, can produce resentment and avoidance that ultimately work against your objective, not to mention reduce new patient referrals.

That’s because at the root of most so-called motivation is an unattractive, self-serving component. Many chiropractors want patients to comply with their recommendations and make changes to their lifestyle for their reasons, not the patient’s reasons. Compliance means acceptance. Compliance means a higher likelihood of recovery and, with it, greater respect. Compliance means the patient “bought” the report and wants better health. Compliance means another chiropractic conquest. In other words, compliance makes you look good.

**Inside-out.**

The solution to this energy-draining dilemma of trying to motivate patients is to choose to inspire them rather than motivate them.

Inspire, as in “to communicate with the spirit; to breathe into.” Fundamentally, inspiring others requires that you love patients enough to uncover what they want and help them get it with the help of chiropractic. When you tap into this inside-out phenomenon and activate this internal sense of purpose, practice takes on a sustainable, attractive sense of ease.

What follows are seven ways to inspire patients…and yourself!
1. Be Inspired

It all starts with you. Are you inspired? Are you grateful? Are you excited by the possibilities and opportunities because of your role as an influencer in the lives of patients and your community? Or, are you just trying to get by? Surviving?

I’m reminded of a confession from a recent participant of The Conversation. His 31 years of marriage were good. He put two daughters through college. He was out of debt and his practice was doing sufficiently well enough to put money away for retirement. Most chiropractors would think they were in heaven under these same circumstances. But this doctor wasn’t inspired. He confessed that when he was with one of his many once-a-month patients, he’d find himself gazing out the window, daydreaming about fly-fishing. While he wanted more of these types of patients, it seemed he took them (and the opportunity to be in their lives each month) for granted.

That won’t do.

If you have any hope of authentically inspiring others, you must be present to the franchise you have and be inspired by it.
Heal Thyself

Mahatma Gandhi put it this way, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Well put. If you want to be an inspiration to others, you must start with yourself. And not only in the mental and spiritual dimensions of being fully engaged and pursuing your dreams, but by being healthy in the physical and emotional realms as well. Not so you can show up “healthier than thou,” but so you’re valid and others are inspired to want for themselves what you are so obviously enjoying. This prompts others to draw near.

Careful. Being too focused on your own health can set the bar too high for patients who may feel that they can’t measure up to such elevated health standards. So, lighten up.

There is little that is inspiring about a moody chiropractor who takes things too seriously, as if practice was a burden. You should be the most upbeat, optimistic and enthusiastic person your patients encounter. One way to make that happen is to finally “get” that what patients do or don’t do is not a reflection of you. God granted them free will to treat their soul package the way they wish. However, if your five-year-old throws a tantrum in the grocery store, yes, it’s a reflection of your parenting skills. But when a patient makes choices about their health that are different from the ones you would make, it’s not a reflection of you.

Having this healthy sense of detachment in which you care, but don’t care too much, is an essential part of being inspirational. In fact, it’s practically impossible to be inspirational any other way. It all starts with you.
2. SEEK TO UNDERSTAND

It stands to reason that if you have any hope of inspiring a patient you must step into their world and understand them. As in understand. Stand under.
Understanding others is ultimately about supporting them. Not in a co-dependent way, but as an encourager and cheerleader. Being supportive requires that you acknowledge that the value most patients place on their health is often a far cry from the value that you do. Few patients are at a level of self-actualization in which they want to be healthy for health’s sake. The key is not to think less of them because they aren’t “enlightened.” The mistake is in imagining that overlooking some shortcoming in their health is a tacit endorsement or approval of their unhealthy lifestyle. It is not. If you wish to be an influencer, you must build rapport and trust. Something difficult to achieve if the patient gets even a whiff of judgment or a “healthier-than-thou” attitude from you.

This is difficult because we’re judging machines. It’s our nature to judge people, circumstances and situations as a means of self-protection. Is this person safe? Is this situation risky? Am I being threatened? Judgment tends to constrain relationships and place an invisible limitation on possibilities.

When you replace judgment with authentic curiosity, opportunities for connection emerge. Careful! Curiosity isn’t merely assauling patients with questions! It’s about showing up open-minded and accepting.

And profoundly listening.

Ultimately, your goal is to build a connection in which the patient feels emotionally safe to lower his or her guard. And while this may not always happen, it is a prerequisite for not only the best doctoring, but for the deeper connection necessary to lead and inspire.
3. Help Them Climb Their Mount Everest

Someone prompted to seek relief isn’t ready to die. They have some compelling reason to live.

Find out what it is and help them accomplish it.

I call it their “Mount Everest” but it could be running a marathon, a 10K, learning to play the piano, getting their kids through college, improving their golf game; the list is endless.

It might sound something like this:

“Over the years I’ve noticed that most patients aren’t seeking chiropractic care because they necessarily want to be intrinsically healthier, but because their lack of health is standing in the way of something even more important. Just wondering, what is that big dream of yours that you hope to do better, enjoy more of or accomplish in your life?”
Believe it or not, when you ask patients directly, they often don’t know. And that’s understandable. After all, when was the last time someone asked you such a question? If they need some time to collect their wits, assign it as “homework” and follow up on a subsequent visit.

“I’m guessing you’ve rarely visited a doctor who’s asked that question. No problem. Could you give it some thought and we can discuss it on a future visit?”

Don’t blow this off. If inspiration is about “breathing into their spirit,” you must tap into what is already inside of them. So, rather than installing your vision, you must kindle and fan the flames of their own passions and dreams.

Your mission, then, is twofold:

1. Uncover their dream, passion or goal.
2. Link chiropractic to the achievement of it.

In other words, find out what they value and what’s important to them (it will be different from what’s important to you), and use your creativity to help them see how chiropractic (better health, greater flexibility, etc.) can help them obtain it.

Naturally, that’s the challenging part.

**Lifestyle Linking**

Thankfully, even if you come up empty handed from time to time (or the patient does), simply being more present to the fact that better health is rarely the patient’s goal will help you make your practice and each patient visit far more patient-centric. Because patients show up for their reasons, not yours. And if you have any hope of creating a long-term relationship that extends beyond the relief of their symptoms, you’ll want to go beyond the “first right answer.”

The example I like to use is golf. Now, I’m not a golfer, but I know people who are. Because it is their passion, they devote many hours (and money) to their favorite pursuit. In fact, they appear to have far more resources available to use in this way than for their health or anything
else. Your ability to help golfers see that chiropractic could improve their golf game (relatively easy I’m guessing), offers tremendous opportunities to enhance their utilization and deepen the relationship far more than symptom relief.

Bottom line? One of the ways you can inspire patients is to help them see how chiropractic care is an investment in their life, not merely their spine or their headaches. That requires an interest, your curiosity and the creativity to present chiropractic as a way to access what patients really want.

Only when you help others get what they want, will you get what you want. This is a long-standing, proven success principle, which in many practices is simply waiting to be applied.
By the time a patient resorts to consulting a chiropractor or any other practitioner, they’ve concluded that their problem isn’t going to self-resolve. This puts patients at a disadvantage, a disadvantage that is tempting to exploit. While there are many exceptions, some medical doctors have used this advantage to assume a heroic, almost mythical, persona in our culture.
One of the ways to inspire patients is to make them big and you small. Make their inborn ability heal big and make your technique small. Make them the hero.

This would be a new experience for patients accustomed to the typical medical doctor relationship who often enter a chiropractic setting believing...

They’re weak—the doctor is strong. Far too many patients are willing to relinquish their responsibilities to a doctor, especially if that doctor communicates a high level of certainty and confidence. And while projecting certitude is helpful, stealing the patient’s confidence in his or her own self-healing abilities is simple exploitation.

You'll be doing most of the work. Without correcting this belief you'll have patients showing up who are about as engaged as when they get their haircut or the oil changed in their car. In other words, not engaged at all—since they assume that all they have to do is show up three times a week and you'll restore them to their pre-complaint status. This is related to...

You control how quickly they recover. Many patients assume that you somehow regulate how quickly chiropractic care will reduce their symptoms. Patients are inclined to attribute slow (or unusually quick) results to you and your adjustments. This may feed your ego when things exceed a patient’s expectations, but can have the reverse effect when their healing capacity is constrained by a lack of resources or an unhealthy lifestyle.

Inspire patients by refusing to take any credit (or blame) for the speed of their recovery. Not with a false modesty, but with an assertive tone that reminds them that they did almost all the work, not you, by:

1. Having the courage to look beyond the symptom-treating medical model
2. Showing up repeatedly so that each visit could build on the ones before
3. Creating the momentum needed to make spinal changes through consistent visits
4. Following the home care recommendations to support the in-office care
5. Having the desire and positive mental attitude essential for healing
You could probably parse it further, but you get the point. They did the heavy lifting. They’re the ones who broke their routine to accommodate your three-times-a-week recommendation.

Most patients will allow you to take the credit. But by refusing, you create an opportunity not only to communicate the inside-out philosophy of chiropractic, but rightfully inspire them to assume greater responsibility for their health.

“Thanks Doc. Whatever you did, it’s really working.”

“You did it not me. Because of your good judgment in selecting our practice and your inborn ability to self-heal, chiropractic has helped you as it has helped millions of others. So, how are we going to get the word out to others?”
5. REMEMBER LITTLE DETAILS

I confess that I’m not as good at this as I’d like to be, but I know that whenever I encounter someone who has remembered some little detail about my life that I’d shared on a previous occasion, it makes me feel important. Wow! You remembered!
This takes the principle of being curious to the next level. It means collecting information about what’s going on in a patient’s life and then following up on it at a later time.

The most basic application of this principle is acknowledging each patient on his or her birthday.

This is a no-brainer that many chiropractors simply ignore. I’ve heard many, many patient focus group participants rave about this simple little gesture. This is especially true as we get older. I remember one elderly woman confessing, a bit teary-eyed, that it was “the only birthday card I got this year.”

Talk about high impact.

Naturally, this requires that you recognize its importance, create systems, implement procedures and acquire resources to make it happen. Systematizing this is all that is required to create that “Gosh, you shouldn’t have” response that inspires others.

Since you have access to each patient’s birth date, it’s relatively easy to act on this suggestion. More difficult, but something that produces an even bigger impact, is remembering anniversaries, house guest visitations, graduations, the names of pets, the birth of grandchildren and all the other countless details and goings on in the lives of patients.

You may need to annotate the patient’s electronic or paper file to help you manage your memory. It will pay back handsome rewards in the form of patients who feel truly listened to and inspired by the way you care, and it is the very stuff that fuels referrals.
6. Offer Hope

Simply put, hope is one of the essential ingredients of healing. No hope. No healing. So it stands to reason that if you can help each patient feel hopeful and optimistic about their recovery, you strengthen the mind/body connection and enhance a patient’s physical and psychological well-being.

Hope inspires patients to be patient, to persevere and even to endure temporary setbacks.

Every patient wants their future to be better than their present. It’s the only reason why they’re seeing you and putting up with the inconvenience of repeated visits.

There are two ways I know to create hope.
“I think you have every reason to be hopeful.”

The first is the most direct. Tell patients. If it’s appropriate, your front desk assistant might find it helpful to assure a new patient on the telephone with something like, “Dr. SoAndSo has helped a lot of people with problems just like yours, so I’m sure she will be anxious to meet you.”

Later, at the consultation, once you’ve determined that the patient is a good candidate for chiropractic care, you might say something like, “I think you have every reason to be hopeful that we can help you. I’m optimistic and you should be too.”

Or perhaps at the conclusion of the report of findings, you might say something like, “We’ve helped so many people with problems just like this that it’s practically routine. I think you’re in the right place and I look forward to helping you.”

The key is to offer hope without guaranteeing a cure.

Share what others have said about their experience.

Testimonials can be so powerful that some jurisdictions actually forbid chiropractors and other practitioners from using them. Imagining that isn’t the case for you, and assuming you have each patient’s written permission, here are some suggestions:

- **Our Patients Speak.** This is a reception room three-ring binder that includes a picture and a brief testimonial about their condition and the results they experienced in your practice. Organize them by admitting complaint! You might even provide a little clinical background, revealing how many visits it took to show progress, other things the patient did to support their in-office care, etc.

- **Website Testimonials.** Same content as your reception room notebook, but placed on your practice website. (No website? Horrors! Check out our sister company [Perfect Patients for a chiropractic website](http://www.patientmedia.com).) Here, pictures are even more important. Even better, get videos of your patients describing their experience.
• Wall of Fame. Place some of the best testimonials on your bulletin board.

Keep in mind what the billionaire, Charles Revson, who created and managed Revlon through five decades said, “In the factory we make cosmetics; in the drugstore we sell hope.”

Inspire patients by helping them see the possibilities of a better world tomorrow.
7. Wait for Something to Happen

It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus who 2,500 years ago observed, “You never step twice into the same river.”

Things change. In fact, count on it.

Many invest massive amounts of energy “educating” patients to value their health, “scaring” patients into placing a higher value on their health, “nagging” patients into taking greater responsibility and a host of manipulative strategies that are often justified as being in the patient’s best interests.
A far more practical approach is to take a long-term view and wait for “something to happen.”


Things happen. Change can often be traced to these moments you could never choreograph (or wish to). Something happens and we decide to “turn over a new leaf,” abandon a bad habit or embrace a new one. It’s these life-changing events that can often prompt someone to rearrange their priorities.

Showing up accepting and nonjudgmental with those who don’t currently value their health can inspire them to return when they do.

Honor their God-given free will to value their health as they wish, especially if it’s different than the value you place on your health. Instead, think five, ten or twenty years out. Show up today in such a way that it would easy, even reassuring, to return to your practice then, after something happens.

Even better, choose to keep in touch during the dormant stage of their care. Because even if they aren’t under active care, many still think of you as their chiropractor. Think of them as your patient—even though they aren’t in the appointment book.

A common mistake is to insist that things happen on our schedule, the way we want them to happen. Jettison this unhelpful, self-centered belief and lighten up. When you do, you give permission for others to make mistakes, learning a more lasting lesson in the process.
SEVEN WAYS TO INSPIRE PATIENTS

Motivation is outside in. Inspiration is inside out.

This is more than semantics. Ignore this distinction and rely strictly on motivating patients and you risk the scourge of all professional caregivers: burnout.

Burnout is a condition in which your impotence in directing patients to follow your instructions produces anger, then resentment and culminates with an emotional detachment and distancing in which patients are seen as problems rather than opportunities.

Further, motivation is an unsustainable drain on your emotional reserves. It cripples far too many chiropractors who mistakenly see patient behaviors as a reflection of their adjusting skills, persuasiveness or report of findings scripting.

Use these seven suggestions to create deeper, more intimate and influential relationships with patients, with your children and with your spouse. And let me know how it goes.

Thanks!

William D. Esteb
bill@patientmedia.com