

# Three Phases Of The Nurse-Patient Relationship

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The nurse-patient relationship is one of the most important parts of effective healthcare. Nurses do not only provide physical care; they also communicate, support, educate, comfort, and advocate for patients. A strong nurse-patient relationship helps patients feel respected, safe, and understood. It also improves communication with the patient's family and supports teamwork among healthcare professionals. In nursing practice, this relationship is often explained through three main phases: the orientation phase, the working phase, and the termination phase (Station, 2011).

These phases help nurses communicate in a professional, organized, and therapeutic way. They also guide nurses in building trust, identifying patient needs, planning care, supporting recovery, and ending the professional relationship appropriately when care is complete.

## Orientation Phase

The orientation phase is the beginning of the nurse-patient relationship. In this phase, the nurse and patient meet, introductions are made, and the foundation of trust is established. The nurse explains their role, gathers information, identifies the patient's immediate concerns, and begins to understand the patient's physical, emotional, cultural, and psychological needs (Peplau, 1997).

Effective communication is very important in this phase because patients may feel anxious, confused, afraid, or uncertain. A nurse should use a calm voice, active listening, eye contact, respect, and a nonjudgmental attitude. The patient should feel that their concerns are being heard and that they are safe to express both positive and negative emotions.

During the orientation phase, the nurse also explains important information such as hospital routines, treatment plans, patient rights, privacy, and available support. Clear communication helps reduce fear and confusion. For example, if a patient is admitted for surgery, the nurse can explain what will happen before and after the procedure, who will be involved, and what the patient should expect.

This phase is also helpful when communicating with the patient's family. Families often feel worried and may need updates about the patient's condition, care plan, and hospital procedures. The nurse should provide accurate information within professional and legal boundaries. When families understand the situation, they are more likely to cooperate with the healthcare team and support the patient.

The orientation phase also improves communication with other healthcare professionals. The nurse

begins collecting assessment data and shares relevant information with doctors, therapists, pharmacists, and other members of the care team. This ensures that everyone involved in the patient's care has a clear understanding of the patient's condition and needs.

## Working Phase

The working phase is the longest and most active phase of the nurse-patient relationship. In this phase, the nurse and patient work together to identify problems, set goals, plan interventions, and evaluate progress. This stage may also be called the identification or exploration phase because the patient's main concerns are explored in more detail.

During the working phase, the nurse provides care, education, emotional support, and guidance. The patient is encouraged to participate in decision-making and take an active role in their recovery. The nurse assesses symptoms, monitors changes, administers medications, teaches self-care, and helps the patient develop coping strategies.

Communication in this phase must be clear, consistent, and patient-centered. The nurse should avoid using unnecessary medical terms that the patient may not understand. Instead, information should be explained in simple language. For example, instead of only saying that a patient has "hypertension," the nurse can explain that the patient's blood pressure is higher than normal and that lifestyle changes and medication may help control it (Sharma et al., 2023).

This phase is especially useful for patient education. Nurses can teach patients about medication use, wound care, diet, exercise, warning signs, follow-up appointments, and disease management. Good communication helps patients understand their condition and increases their confidence in managing their health.

The working phase also helps families become part of the care process. With the patient's permission, nurses can teach family members how to support the patient at home. For example, a family may need to learn how to assist with mobility, monitor symptoms, provide emotional support, or encourage medication adherence. This reduces the risk of confusion after discharge.

For healthcare professionals, the working phase supports teamwork and coordination. Nurses communicate changes in the patient's condition, report concerns, document care, and participate in care planning. Effective communication prevents errors, avoids duplication of care, and ensures that all professionals are working toward the same goals.

## Termination Phase

The termination phase occurs when the nurse-patient relationship comes to an end. This may happen when the patient is discharged, transferred to another unit, assigned to another nurse, or when the

goals of care have been achieved. Although this phase may seem simple, it is very important because it helps the patient move toward independence and continuity of care.

In the termination phase, the nurse reviews the patient's progress and evaluates whether the goals of care have been met. The nurse may discuss what the patient has learned, what improvements have occurred, and what steps are still needed. This helps the patient recognize their own progress and feel more confident.

Clear communication during this phase is essential. The nurse should provide discharge instructions, explain medications, review follow-up appointments, and teach the patient what symptoms require medical attention. Patients should be allowed to ask questions so that misunderstandings can be corrected before they leave the healthcare setting.

The termination phase is also important for the patient's family. Family members may need instructions about home care, diet, medication schedules, safety precautions, or emergency warning signs. When families receive clear information, they can support the patient more effectively after discharge.

For healthcare professionals, the termination phase involves proper handover and documentation. If the patient is transferred to another unit or healthcare facility, the nurse must communicate important information to the next care team. This may include the patient's diagnosis, medications, allergies, current condition, care needs, and pending tests. Good handover communication protects patient safety and supports continuity of care.

The nurse must also maintain professional boundaries during termination. A therapeutic nurse-patient relationship is professional, not personal. The nurse may show warmth, compassion, and respect, but the relationship should end appropriately when care is completed. This helps protect both the patient and the nurse.

## How the Three Phases Improve Communication

The three phases of the nurse-patient relationship improve communication by giving nurses a clear structure to follow. In the orientation phase, communication is focused on building trust and understanding the patient's needs. In the working phase, communication is focused on care, education, treatment, and problem-solving. In the termination phase, communication is focused on closure, discharge planning, independence, and continuity of care.

These phases also help nurses communicate with different groups. With patients, they promote trust, understanding, and participation. With families, they support education, reassurance, and cooperation. With healthcare professionals, they improve teamwork, documentation, and patient safety.

A strong nurse-patient relationship depends on self-awareness, empathy, active listening, honesty, respect, and professionalism. Nurses must be aware of their own emotions and avoid allowing personal opinions or biases to affect patient care. They must also respect patient privacy, cultural differences, and individual preferences.

## Conclusion

The three phases of the nurse-patient relationship are the orientation phase, working phase, and termination phase. Each phase has a specific purpose and helps nurses communicate effectively with patients, families, and healthcare professionals. The orientation phase builds trust and begins assessment. The working phase focuses on care, education, problem-solving, and emotional support. The termination phase prepares the patient for independence, discharge, or transfer while maintaining professional boundaries. Together, these phases create a therapeutic relationship that supports patient recovery, improves communication, and promotes safe and compassionate nursing care (Ernstmeyer & Christman, 2022; Nursing Crib, 2014).

## References

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