

Humor 101

Category: The Exam Room

written by Patti Cassidy | September 6, 2025

Several days a year I'm what's known as a Standardized Patient. An actor. A fake. A learning tool for beginning medical students. From interacting with me, they learn to communicate with "real" people in a medical setting.

I meet with my fellow SPs (we all have the same name today) in a conference room before we head out to our various assigned examining rooms. We've memorized our facts and stats: who we are, our chief complaints, our family histories. We want to be as realistic as possible. In return, we get the lowdown on the details of the day.

When we enter our rooms, precepting doctors greet us from monitors on zoom. We chat for a few minutes before they turn off their cameras. Today there will be thirty students and ten Standardized Patients and preceptors.

A buzzer sounds and we're off.

Student #1 knocks, enters and introduces himself. At first, I forget my character's name. Embarrassing. I pretend it's an elder's lapse of memory.

He's very nervous, though the stakes are low. He doesn't have to hit the diagnosis on the nose, though he may have some theories. He just has to practice communication skills. He has to learn how to listen.

I answer a few of his questions humorously. Make light of myself.

He's hesitant to laugh or smile too much. He's not sure if it will seem disrespectful: as if he's making fun of me.

But this actually ends up being an important lesson of the meeting.

When the preceptor turns on the screen again, she asks for my evaluation of our time together. I answer with his strengths and weaknesses. I play softball, of course. Encourage rather than discourage.

I mention that I was happy when he responded well to my humor. It relaxed me and made the interview flow more easily. I felt more open to his questions.

The preceptor, surprised, agrees. She says the role of humor in doctor-patient conversations is too often overlooked, yet can be so valuable.

I don't know if this new student will remember it, but perhaps it will pop up when he most needs it. I wish him well.

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