Checking In

December 14, 2015 By Aundaray Guess

I'm pretty sure this scenario will feel familiar to those living with HIV and have regular visit with their doctors. After waiting for what seems forever in the waiting room, you walk into the examination room and wait for your doctor visit. The nurse comes in and checks all your vitals and like a good robot you follow. In some cases, you're steps ahead as before you're asked you open your mouth to get your temperature, pull up your sleeve for your blood pressure and stick out your finger in order for a device to be attached for more readings. Finally the doctor walks in and you do something you've been doing for years. You check in.

The check in goes like this.

Doctor- How do you feel?

You- Fine.

Doctor- Any pain?

You- No.

Doctor- What meds are you on?

You (thinking to yourself) - Don't you know. You're the one who wrote it out. Isn't it on my records. Don't you remember? Don't you remember me?

And although this conversation runs in your head, what comes out is another single word answer to his question and before you know it you're out the door. You realize the ninety-minutes you spent waiting for the doctor, eighty-five minutes was waiting and only 10 minutes spent checking in with your doctor.

The relationship with your doctor often mirrors relationships we have with others. In the beginning when we're learning about who that person is there's back and forth dialogue of discussions. This engagement provides a look of who that person is. Then out the blue the relationship change and what was once seemed like talking for hours, is now small talk. If we let it our relationship with our primary doctor can become the same. You're no longer having active back and forth discussion but instead you're simply providing yes and no answer to the doctor's questions.

The negatives of having this form of relationship are that you actually may not be receiving the full benefit of care. The window of opportunity to discuss about potential problems is now closed off and alertness of emerging issue goes undiscussed. The pain on your body which you feel is unassociated with your HIV status is not shared because you didn't hear the right questions. Or worse you sense the doctor is pressed for time so you go along with the program and allow yourself to be rushed. Worse, you may assume the doctor only cares about physical ailments and you keep quiet any mental health concerns you have. Not fully aware of how any mental health concerns may have an indirect impact on your HIV health.

Who's to blame? It's easy to point fingers at the doctor because after all they are the doctor. Or blame can be placed on medical insurance companies which places the pressure on doctors to see as many patients during the day as possible. Or the fault can be ours for falling into a passive role and not being the advocate for our own wants and needs.

As someone who had to learn to stop simply checking in with my doctor, these are some tips I've used and offer to others.

Recognize when you're becoming too comfortable

As shared above, when you feel you're simply answering your doctor's questions with yes or no answers, this may be a sign the relationship is becoming stale. Of course there will be some moments when you have nothing to report, but don't let simple check-in be the norm. Remember the early days of when you started to see your doctor and the level of engagement. That should be your norm.

Be prepared with your questions

Before your actual visit have your questions ready to discuss. It may even feel odd to write them down, but at least you'll have them handy in case you forget what you were planning to ask. This also helps if your doctor has limited time to speak with you. It also helps you address what's most important to you.

Don't be passive aggressive

The worst thing to do with your doctor is to create a passive aggressive relationship where you are upset they don't ask you questions and yet you continue to visit them with bringing it up as an issue. No matter how long a relationship you have with your doctor, they can't read your mind so it's up to you to be your own advocate. Only you know your true needs and to get what you want you have to speak up.

There are no stupid questions

Sometimes you may feel your question has nothing to do with your HIV status. Sitting with your doctor is the perfect time to bring up any issue. Although they may not be able to personally assist, they should be able to refer you to other medical professionals who can assist you with your concerns.

Don’t be afraid to fire your doctor

You may feel like you’ve done everything to have an active relationship with your doctor with no luck. There should be a great concern if the person advising you and your health is not listening to you. Or as shared, you feel they don’t make the time to answer your questions. Just like any bad relationship, it may be time to weigh the pros and the cons and evaluate whether you should seek a new provider. This shouldn’t be the automatic go to but if you feel there are no other options, perhaps another doctor can assist your needs.

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