



## Nine Tips for Making Hospital Visits by Dave Gallagher, D. Min.

Perhaps nothing you do in ministry is more important than personal contact with the people in your 70-plus group. While this can throw you into uncomfortable situations, it is also where you can make the most difference in people's lives. The

following ideas will help you make the most of visiting folks in the hospital and other caregiving facilities.

1. **Check your attitude, feelings, and emotions:** Conduct a quick spiritual-attitude check before you enter a patient's room. Pause in your car before entering the hospital or stop in the hospital chapel for a brief time of prayer before making the visit.
2. **Make the visit comfortable:** Enter the room with a warm smile and a friendly greeting. Say a few words of encouragement but be careful not to give medical advice. Even simple phrases such as "It will all work out" or "You'll be feeling better in no time" might not be true. While you want to show genuine concern for the individual, focus on conversation that you would have if the individual were not in the hospital. Be natural.
3. **Do not make it seem that you are rushing away.** Aim to stay for about 10-15 minutes – but no longer (unless the patient truly asks you to stay longer and you have the time to stay).
4. **Be sensitive:** Try to read a patient's attitude, feelings, emotions, and physical comfort. Even if you spent an hour driving to visit one patient, make sure he or she is up for the visit. Offer to return if he or she is not ready for visitors.
5. **Meet spiritual needs:** Of course your role is as a spiritual provider. You offer spiritual strength and encouragement to people in need. Be sure to be sensitive to the spiritual needs of those you are visiting.
6. **Accept the person as he or she is:** Use "reflective listening." Reflect back what you hear the person saying or sense in his or her feelings. For example, "It sounds like you're feeling discouraged today," and then follow up with a word of encouragement. Accept the patient's feelings and attitudes.
7. **Respect the patient:** Always be positive even when it is difficult. You may not appreciate what you hear, but respect their feelings.
8. **Encourage the patient:** Reading Scripture, speaking a few words of encouragement, and praying for the patient is the best encouragement you can provide. However, always ask the patient's permission to read Scripture or pray and honor the individual's response.
9. **Before surgery:** When someone is hospitalized for surgery, nurses typically have many questions for the patient. When you arrive, check in with the nurse's station, identify yourself as the patient's pastor (or Stephen Minister or friend from their church) and ask if you may visit the patient. If a nurse needs to ask the patient questions, simply excuse yourself and return after the nurse leaves. Respect the patient's privacy.

Things NOT to do when making hospital visits:

These rules also apply to visitations at hospices, assisted-living centers, skilled nursing care, adult group homes or other care centers:

1. **Don't disobey posted signs.** For example, if a sign says "no visitors," check with the nurse's station.

2. **Don't forget your role.** You're not a nurse, doctor, psychologist, social worker, financial planner, time manager, lawyer, or family member. Remember that you are the pastor (or Stephen Minister or friend from the church) and need to stay in that role.
3. **Don't serve Communion without permission from the patient's nurse.** In some situations, you could cause serious problems by giving even a small amount of food or drink.
4. **Don't be negative.** Sometimes that's difficult, but with God's help, you can be positive in all situations.
5. **Don't be the focus of the conversation.** Talk about the patient and his or her needs. Don't compare your experiences with whatever surgery or illness the patient is experiencing.
6. **Don't try to outtalk the person.** Instead, ask questions to draw out the patient (if they feel like talking; if not, let them rest and read some Scripture and pray). If the patient seems tired, offer to pray. When you leave, you can add, "I'll stop back and see you (day)."
7. **Don't compare the patient's situation with others or offer solutions.**
8. **Don't try to organize the person.** Leave their hospital bedside tray alone unless they ask you for help.
9. **Don't be unnatural.** You do not have to pretend; just be yourself.

The above material used by permission and is taken from the book, *Pastoral Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Group Publishing, Loveland, CO © 2006, pages 155-156; "9 Tips for Hospital Visits" by Dave Gallagher

Helpful resources:

- Ron Hutchcraft, *Surviving the Storms of Stress*, RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI ©2000
- Kirkwood, Neville A., *Pastoral Care in Hospitals*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA ©1995
- Koenig, Harold G., and Weaver, Andrew J., *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN ©1998
- *Light for my Path Prayers & Promises*, Barbour Publishing, Uhrichsville, Ohio, ©2003
- Sparks, Martha Evans, *Strength for Today*, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis, IN, ©2005