

Top 10 Things I Wish I Knew as A New Primary Care Nurse Practitioner



Chris Lambert, FNP, shares some advice on how to manage your time during appointments, patient assessments, screening for mental health, and decision-making as a new NP.

1. Prioritize Your Appointments

In family practice, a follow-up is never *'just'* a follow-up. Remember that you are often the medical 'home' for the patient, and they may have a series of concerns prepared for you that day. After greeting the patient, I recommend immediately prioritizing their concerns to gauge which are the most important to address within your given timeframe. This may necessitate scheduling extra time, or even a nurse visit, to implement additional screening or testing.

2. Delegate, Delegate, Delegate

You are an expert in critically analyzing both objective *and* subjective information to form a diagnosis and treatment plan as an advanced practice nurse. However, obtaining this information can often be accomplished by your team. Whenever possible, I recommend delegating less complex tasks such as data and specimen collection to your team, or even to the patient through self-administered screenings.

3. Equip Yourself to Treat Mental Illness

As a new graduate advanced practice nurse, I did not realize how difficult it could be to get specialty provider care for my mental health patients. I quickly discovered that my patients often had no option but to pursue diagnosis and treatment in the primary care setting due to unavailability of specialty mental health providers or extended wait times. As advanced practice nurses in the primary care setting, we must be equipped and willing to treat mental illness within our given patient populations.

4. Screen for Mental Health Conditions

Excellent screening tests exist for conditions such as major depressive and bipolar disorders. Often these tests can be completed by the patient prior to the visit. The data from the screen tools helps make the primary care visit more efficient and facilitates a more focused examination. This can help a practitioner determine if a patient may have a certain condition and may lead to a more appropriate diagnosis.

5. Consider Family History in Mental Health

Family history is often overlooked—particularly among new primary care providers—when trying to make a mental health diagnosis. Similarities in mental health conditions among family members can often be a clue as to the patient's diagnosis. Obtaining and reviewing family history prior to a mental health visit may better equip you to serve the patient with accuracy.

6. Listen to the Patient

This one may seem obvious, but as a nurse, you are already an expert in holistic patient care and often the keys to an accurate diagnosis are contained within a conversation with the patient. Don't be afraid to delve deeper by asking open questions and utilizing active listening techniques to draw out details of the patient's experience. Using these methods, you will gain insight, and the patient will feel heard.

7. Leave Your Preconceived Diagnosis at the Door

In full transparency, this advice comes from years of trial and error. Find a balance in building from the patient care experience while acknowledging that every patient is unique. Every patient is different, and every patient presentation is different. Do not let your (or the patient's) previous diagnoses get in the way of your critical thinking expertise. This can often delay the time to proper diagnosis and subsequent treatment.

8. Do Not Underestimate Social Determinants of Health

This has become a foreground discussion within the realm of advanced practice nursing and is critical to consider within your practice. Social determinants of health such as socioeconomic status, demographic disparity, and access to healthcare services are critical factors in influencing whether the patient receives the treatment they need. We must acknowledge and address these determinants and be ready to practice to the fullest extent of our training to deliver the service our patient needs, when they need it.

9. Value Your Perspective

You are so valuable to the patient as a primary care advanced practice nurse. You are skilled to treat the patient for chronic conditions while having the holistic perspective to acknowledge all the unique circumstances that may be impacting the patient. Embrace your holistic perspective as a nurse while you engage patients in treatment planning. Doing this will strengthen the patient-provider relationship and improve the overall healthcare experience.

10. Empower the Patient

A chronic health diagnosis, whether it be physical or mental, can be intimidating and overwhelming for the patient. Engaging them through education and shared decision-making empowers the patient and mitigates fear. An empowered patient is a more engaged and generally satisfied patient. These are the patients that you will look forward to seeing in the office for years to come.