My cell phone rang at 1:55 p.m. and rolled over to voicemail. It was Tom [patient’s name is fictitious], leaving me a message to cancel his 2:30 p.m. appointment, just 35 minutes from now, clearly violating my 24-hour cancellation policy. He gave no good explanation, only that he “wasn’t feeling well,” and this was his second cancellation in the past four weeks. I took a deep breath and let out a big sigh, uncertain how I should react to this voicemail. I was already en route to his appointment.

He was a patient going through recovery from alcohol abuse, with known anxiety and depression, insomnia, coronary artery disease, spinal stenosis, and chronic joint pain. I knew his history well, and it included a very dysfunctional childhood of ongoing abuse together with many years of struggle to arrive at this point in his now adult life. The more logical, ego-based part of me was furious. How could he do this to me? It totally disrupted my afternoon schedule.

I exited the highway and found a small shopping center where I circled the parking lot numerous times to reflect, ponder, and process. As I slowly wove my way around the parked cars, my mind became clearer and my attitude softened. I was able to access the gentler, more compassionate parts of myself and acknowledge the hardships and complexity of his daily life.
Using my background as a holistic nurse practitioner and a nurse coach, I felt that I was guiding Tom to make some important changes in his health and overall well-being, physically, mentally, and spiritually: less pain and suffering, reduced medication usage, healthier dietary intake, improved anxiety and depression, and better sleep.

Two weeks prior to this date, we had a very meaningful discussion about his knee pain, and when I explained to him that his pain was not just from the swelling from his previous total knee replacement, but included a strong bio-emotional component as well, he was relieved. On a very deep level, I believe he somehow already knew this, but the orthopedic surgeon had told him that the only way to relieve his pain was with another surgery. So he was feeling very conflicted about his chronic knee pain and how to treat it.

Tom is one of many patients on my caseload who has multiple comorbidities and very complex needs. The work is challenging and rewarding, and certainly draws on my blended education and experience as a nurse practitioner, holistic nurse, and nurse coach. As a holistic nurse, my guiding principle is that each and every patient is treated with unconditional positive regard. I try to honor each person as an integrated whole being, recognizing each person’s “unique history, culture, beliefs, and story” (Dossey, 2015, p. 29).

Additionally, drawing from a broad perspective of integrative care, I strive to incorporate research and evidence-based practice from other disciplines. For example, the ACE study (Felitti et al., 1998) found that childhood experiences can strongly impact our health and wellness as adults. I also find it helpful to keep current with research from authors such as Bessel van der Kolk (2014), who states that past trauma has “ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present” (p. 21).

As a nurse coach, my practice is based on an integrative, integral, and holistic perspective that includes a “bio-psycho-social-spiritual-cultural-environmental model” for each and every person that I treat (Hess et al., 2013, p. 19). By engaging in deep listening and utilizing various types of knowing (including intuition), I strive to establish a trusting relationship with each client. This is a very different approach from what many patients like Tom are used to. Conventional medicine often disregards and labels these patients “noncompliant.” The nurse coaching perspective honors every individuals uniqueness and personal life story.

I believe that nurse coaching is a “dynamic partnership with clients who are moving toward a new place in life . . . toward new ways of being and living” (Bark, 2011, p. 4). As we continually strive to operate from new ways of being with our patients – listening instead of judging – we are facilitating new ways of being within their own lives.

The more I drove and reflected that afternoon on Tom’s missed appointment, the calmer and more accepting I became of his cancellation. My schedule was not any more important than whatever distress he was feeling that day. By valuing Tom as the authority in our relationship, honoring our partnership, and viewing this incident from a united perspective, I could better assist him on his journey toward optimal health.

Nurse coaching opens doors for caring, whole-person relationships, particularly for complex patients who may not feel cared for in our current healthcare system. Additionally, nurse coaches are in a unique position to improve health outcomes by facilitating behavior and lifestyle changes.

REFERENCES

Karen Radtke, MSN, APN, HWNC-BC, AHN-BC is a master’s prepared Advanced Practice Nurse (Nurse Practitioner), licensed in both Wisconsin and Illinois, a nationally board-certified Holistic Nurse, and a nationally board-certified Nurse Coach. She is the owner/director of Integral Health Solutions. She has more than 20 years of experience as a Nurse Practitioner in a variety of settings, including primary care, chronic disease management, and nursing education. When she’s not collaborating with her clients, she enjoys gardening, snowshoeing, natural habitat restoration, and raising therapy dogs.

Tips for Working with Complex Patients
For those of us who treat complex patients, I offer the following guidelines:
✔ Honor and respect the whole person in his/her entirety, without judging.
✔ Listen deeply and remember the importance of silence.
✔ Acknowledge and utilize multiple ways of knowing, including intuition.
✔ Strive to partner with the patient in every step of the process.
✔ Allow every thought you have and word you speak to be guided by compassion.