

# Helping Patients Cope with Needle Fear

## Compassion, Understanding, and Respect Go a Long Way

### Needle Fear: It's for Real

Fear of needles is very real and very physical for many people. It is a phobia with an actual medical insurance code. It is debilitating and embarrassing for those who suffer from it. But as real as needle fear is for your patient, it is as real for you each time you have to cannulate that fearful patient. Try to remember that while inserting a needle is business as usual for you, it can be a nightmare for your patient. Communicate compassion and respect so the patient can accept their condition without embarrassment. By assuring the patient that his or her condition is real, you remove the stigma associated with their suffering. Then, do what you can to ease their anxiety and the physical effects caused by it. Understanding and addressing the issue up front will make your job easier in the end.

### Causes and Manifestations of Needle Fear

Needle fear is caused by many different stimuli, including fear of:

- Seeing needles
- Handling needles
- Thinking of needles
- Cannulation by someone else
- Self-cannulation

Needle fear causes a series of physical reactions, including:

- An increase in heart rate and blood pressure
- A responsive decrease in heart rate and blood pressure as the brain tries to get enough blood
- A subsequent release of stress hormones and possible heart rhythm fluctuations
- In turn causing paleness, sweating, dizziness, nausea, and even fainting
- Possible reduced health due to missing dialysis treatments because of fear



### Tips for Helping to Reduce a Patient's Needle Fear

- Assess the level of your patient's needle fear
  - Ask them if they are afraid and what they experience before, during, and after cannulation
- If they get dizzy—bring more blood to their head
  - Lie the patient flat, or tilt their chair so their feet are higher than their head
- If they fear the pain of the needle stick—anesthetize
  - Use a topical numbing agent on the needle insertion site
- If they're generally afraid—and if it is appropriate, suggest therapy
  - Desensitization therapy that slowly exposes the patient to their fears may help
- If they fear others sticking them—suggest they take charge themselves
  - Teaching them to put in their own needles puts them in control, distracting them from the pain
- If they really can't stand the needles—and if appropriate, explain how to avoid them
  - Teach them about the possibility/appropriateness of peritoneal dialysis (PD) treatments

**Remember, it is not your patient's fault that he or she has needle fear. Show compassion, understanding, and respect for the patient and their fear.**