Beyond Ask Me 3

The Partnership for Clear Communication's Ask Me 3 materials and tools are quite useful and provide patients with some very useful cues for engaging in a productive dialogue with patients.

Ask Me 3 Questions:

1. What is my main problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why is it important for me to do this?

These 3 open-ended questions will certainly stimulate clinicians to share their thinking with patients, provide education and engage in productive dialogue.

However, I also would like to share some thoughts about their limitations. The questions, when they stand alone, are rather clinician-centered and assume that the clinician knows the patient’s "main problem", knows what the patient "needs" to do, and knows what the patient needs to know to be convinced to follow-through. These questions can work quite well if they follow a thorough exploration of the patient’s story and their beliefs and concerns about their condition and treatment. Only after the patient’s ideas, beliefs, expectations and preferences are elicited does the clinician know how to respond to the Ask Me 3 questions. Unfortunately, research studies on clinician-patient communication have demonstrated that many clinicians do not take these initial steps to fully understand patient’s perspectives, needs and concerns.

Moreover, depending on where the patient is in the course of their illness, the clinician may not know the answers to the Ask Me 3 questions. Sure, there are times when the diagnosis is quite evident and treatment options are quite clear. However, in many cases, there is a need to consider multiple diagnostic possibilities, juggle multiple health conditions and decide (together with the patient) on a wide range of treatment options. A patient-centered approach to eliciting the patient’s story, symptoms, concerns and feeling is necessary for this process to go well. A really good description of the ways in which clinician’s thinking may go awry (or well) can be found in the recent book by Jerome Groopman, “How Doctors Think” (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2007). (In the Epilogue, Groupman suggests a number of additional questions that patients might ask to promote more effective interactions: “What else could it be?”; “Is there anything that doesn’t fit?”; “Is it possible I have more than one problem?”).

Also, based on evidence from research studies on clinician-patient communication and patient education, adoption of strategies to enhance patient activation, patient participation in decisions, collaboration on goals and enhancement of self-management produce better outcomes. Judith Hibbard’s work on patient activation provide an excellent model for a more collaborative patient-centered approach to patient education and self-management support. Thus, though use of the Ask Me 3 questions by patients may lead to enhanced knowledge and understanding, encouraging patient use of these questions alone will not lead to shared decision making, collaborative goal setting and higher levels of patient activation and empowerment.
In the New Health Partnerships (NHP) Learning Community, we have been encouraging clinical teams to consider adopting strategies for producing more productive interactions that empower and activate patients. Here is a little snippet of the work we have been doing:

The following questions, raised by a member of the clinical team, can facilitate patient-centered education and self-management. These are tools that can be used to explore patient knowledge, ideas, feelings, preferences, needs and values. We don’t suggest that all of these questions be used in every encounter. Applying just one of these questions may open the door to more effective dialogue and a more collaborative and productive interaction.

- What ideas do you have about what is contributing to your problem? [Knowledge, beliefs]
- What ideas do you have about treatment or things you can do to manage your condition? [Knowledge, preferences]
- How important do you think it is to do [X treatment or self-management task] to manage or treat your condition? [Ideas, Values, Preferences]
- What is most important for you to accomplish during your visit today? [Agenda]
- What would you like to know about your condition? [Knowledge, Preferences]
- What concerns you the most about your condition? [Feelings]
- What specifically would you like to work on to manage your condition? [Goals]
- What would help you to manage your condition? [Needs, Preferences]
- How confident are you that you could do [X treatment or self-management task]? [Knowledge, beliefs]
- What might get in the way or keep you from being successful? [Barriers]

Finally, one might consider how these questions might be adopted so they can be asked by patients to explore clinicians’ ideas (ala Groopman):

Questions for **patients** to consider using to facilitate exploration of **clinician** thinking. (Note: these link with the questions for clinicians to use to explore patient needs, preference, and values):

- What do you think is most important for us to accomplish during my visit today? [Agenda]
- What would you like to know about how I am doing with my condition? [Knowledge, Preferences]
- What ideas do you have about what is contributing to my problem? [Knowledge, beliefs]
- What ideas do you have about treatment or things I can do to manage my condition? [Knowledge, preferences]
- What concerns you the most about my condition? [Feelings]
- How important do you think it is for me to do [X treatment or self-management task] to manage or treat my condition? [Ideas, Values, Preferences?]
- Knowing me and where I am with my condition, what do you recommend I do next? What else? [Goals]
- What do you think would best help me to manage my condition? [Needs, Preferences]
- How confident are you that the plan we developed will be successful [X treatment or self-management task]? 
- What, in your opinion, might get in the way of my success? [Barriers]
- Many clinicians have difficulty asking patients about their use of medications. Would you like me to tell you about the troubles I am having taking the medications your prescribed? [Barriers to medication taking]