

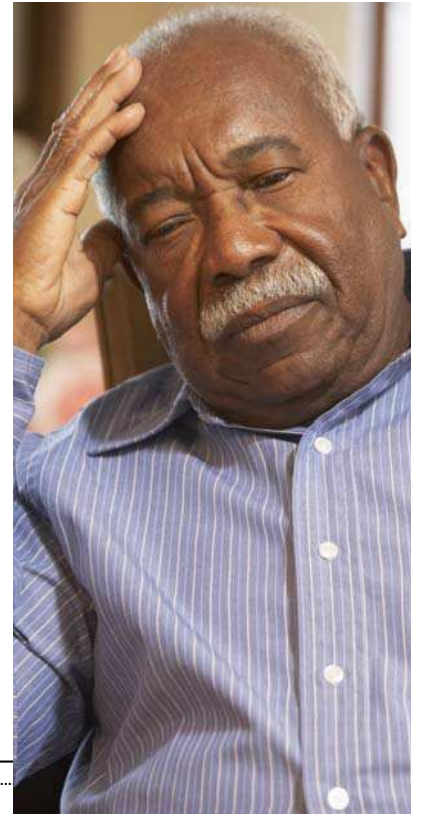


*Developing Top-Notch CNA's, One Inservice at a Time*

877.809.5515

[www.knowingmore.com](http://www.knowingmore.com)

[info@knowingmore.com](mailto:info@knowingmore.com)



***A Communications Module:***

# **HANDLING COMPLAINTS**

© 1998-2014

*May be copied for use within each physical location that purchases this inservice topic.*



*Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time*



*A Communications Module:*

## HANDLING COMPLAINTS

We hope you enjoy this inservice, prepared by registered nurses especially for nursing assistants like you!

## Instructions for the Learner

*If you are studying the inservice on your own, please do the following:*

- Read through **all** the material. You may find it useful to have a highlighting marker nearby as you read. Highlight any information that is new to you or that you feel is especially important.
- If you have questions about anything you read, please ask \_\_\_\_\_.
- Take the quiz. Think about each statement and pick the best answer.
- Check with your supervisor for the right answers. You need **8 correct** to pass!
- Print your name, write in the date, and then sign your name.
- Keep the inservice information for yourself and turn in the quiz page to \_\_\_\_\_ no later than \_\_\_\_\_. Show your Inservice Club Membership Card to \_\_\_\_\_ so that it can be initialed.
- Email In the Know at [feedback@knowingmore.com](mailto:feedback@knowingmore.com) with your comments and/or suggestions for improving this inservice.

**THANK YOU!**

**After finishing this inservice, you will be able to:**

*Describe the five most likely reasons people complain.*



*List the top five issues complained about by healthcare clients.*



*Explain the four step process that can be used to resolve most complaints.*



*Apply the same principle of handling complaints from clients to handling feedback from supervisors and coworkers.*



*Use the four steps (listen, apologize, solve, thank) in your daily work when handling complaints.*



*Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time*

## Inside This Inservice:

Why Do People Complain	2
What Do People Complain About?	3
Active Listening	4
Sincere Apology	5
Solve the Problem	6
Show Gratitude.	7
If the Situation Is Dangerous . . .	8
Handling Complaints from a Boss	9
Final Tips!	10



© 2014 In the Know, Inc.  
[www.knowingmore.com](http://www.knowingmore.com)  
May be copied for use within each physical location that purchases this inservice from In the Know. All other copying or distribution is strictly prohibited.

## A Communications Module: Handling Complaints

### “IT WASN’T MY FAULT!”

Miss Rose was admitted to the nursing home to recover from a long bout of pneumonia. She had a number of chronic conditions and early stage dementia. Her daughter notified the nursing staff that Miss Rose was very mobile and tended to wander in unfamiliar surroundings.

Within hours of admission, Miss Rose wandered out of the facility. The daughter was notified and the CNA, Jean, was in the room when she came to make sure her mother was okay.

Even though **Jean was not directly responsible** for Miss Rose’s wandering, she was the person present to hear the complaint from the family.

Miss Rose’s daughter said, “I told you people she might wander. Why didn’t you watch her better? She could have been killed.”

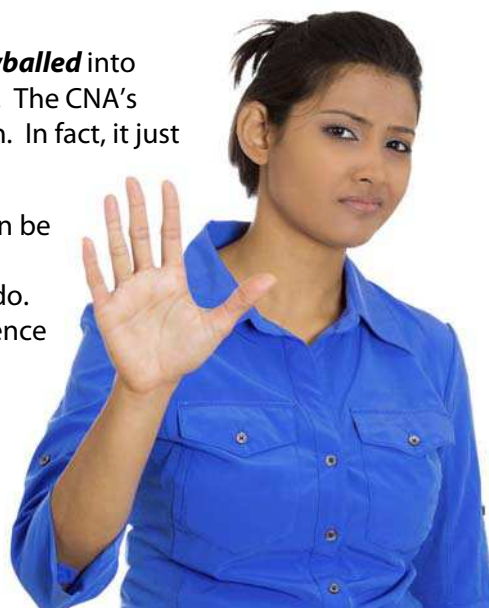
**Jean felt attacked** by the daughter. She told her, “Look, I just got here. I had nothing to do with this. You need to talk to the nursing supervisor about this.”

When the daughter spoke to the supervisor, she had two complaints. One was that the facility ignored her concerns about her mother’s wandering. The second complaint was that the staff member caring for her mother was rude and unprofessional.

Miss Rose’s daughter’s **problem just snowballed** into something much bigger than it had to be. The CNA’s response did nothing to help the situation. In fact, it just made everything worse.

Hearing and responding to complaints can be difficult, especially if you feel like you are being attacked for something you didn’t do. But your response can make all the difference in how the situation turns out.

**Keep reading to learn all about the complaints people make and how you can respond in a way that helps resolve the situation quickly and leaves everyone feeling happy.**





## WHY DO PEOPLE COMPLAIN?

**Before you can “handle” complaints, it’s a good idea to try to understand where they come from. Here are a few common reasons the people you take care of on a regular basis may complain:**

- Unmet Expectations.** The #1 reason people complain about a product, service or circumstance is because they have certain expectations about how things are “supposed” to be—and those expectations are not met.
 

**Example:** *Mrs. Howard’s mother was a nurse “in the old days.” Mrs. Howard always felt great admiration for nurses. She had an expectation that all nurses would be warm and loving, just like her mother. When she became ill, she was disappointed that her care seemed “cold” and impersonal. Mrs. Howard wrote a formal complaint to management and even sent a letter to the local newspaper complaining about the declining state of nursing care.*
- Stress / Frustration / Anxiety / Fear.** Many of the clients and family members you encounter are dealing with heavy issues. There may be a new diagnosis of a terminal illness or a worsening chronic condition. They may be dealing with loss, such as loss of independence, health or even loss of a loved one. In addition to the stress of an illness, most of your clients are also dealing with the frustrations of navigating the healthcare system and fighting for coverage from their insurance companies, all while trying to manage things at home.
- Pain.** It’s normal to be grumpy and disagreeable when you are in pain. Think about how miserable life can be when you just have a headache or a pulled muscle. Now multiply that by 1000, particularly if the person is dealing with pain associated with cancer or surgery. Being in pain, especially unrelieved pain can lead even the sweetest person to lodge a complaint (about ANYTHING)!
- Feeling ignored.** Being left in a waiting room, unanswered call bells, unreturned phone calls from the doctor, requests for pain medication that are ignored or forgotten, and never getting a straight answer from anyone can make clients and their family members start to feel helpless, angry and “trapped.” And what do people do when they feel “trapped?” They fight back!
- Attention seeking.** A small portion of complaints may come out of a simple need for attention. Sometimes, people who are lonely complain just to have someone to talk to or something to do.



## The Facts

### PATIENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO COMPLAIN

In most of the developed world, patients are protected by certain rights. In the United States, this is called the “Patients’ Bill of Rights.”

One of the rights patients in North America and most of Europe have is the right to complain.

Here, all patients have the right to voice complaints regarding their care. They also have the right to expect that those complaints will be reviewed, and, when possible, resolved.

In addition, to further protect patients, their complaints must in **no way** make a difference on how they are treated or keep them from getting medical care in the future.

## WHAT'S NEW?

Grab your favorite highlighter! As you read this inservice, **highlight five things** you learn that you didn't know before. Share this new information with your co-workers!



## WHAT ISSUES DO PEOPLE COMPLAIN ABOUT?

**Billing Errors.** The #1 complaint most often lodged against a healthcare provider is a problem with billing. Errors include billing for services not performed, double billing, excessive cost and failure to code billing properly so that insurance will cover it.

⇒ For example, one patient's bill showed she had undergone three separate surgeries on her hand. She was in the hospital for a broken hip.

You may think billing errors have nothing to do with you, but your careful attention to charting exactly what you do and what you use directly affects the bill. In addition, when you chart the client's ability to help (or not) during feeding, transfers, bathing, etc., you affect the way the diagnosis is coded, which determines how much the insurance company will pay.

**Unprofessional conduct.** Coming in a close second to billing complaints are complaints about unprofessional behaviors. Anyone on the healthcare team can be called out for unprofessional behavior. Common complaints include rudeness, bad attitude, laziness, being disrespectful, talking on a cell phone during care delivery, and talking loudly to co-workers about inappropriate topics where clients can hear.

⇒ A patient review card from a long term care facility described in detail the personal problems of one of the CNAs on staff. The description included the Aide's name, her boyfriend's name and the date (and place) of conception of her currently unplanned pregnancy. The woman who wrote the complaint knew all this information because the CNA had a full conversation about it with a co-worker while giving a bed bath to the woman's mother's roommate.

**Poor communication.** Many complaints can be traced back to a problem with communication. Problems often stem from poor or no patient education, poor communication during the handoff

(between facilities and between shifts) and poor communication between doctors and patients.

⇒ In California, a man was admitted on a Tuesday to have a planned surgery. He was told he would stay three days. On the first day, his Medicare insurance carrier changed and his regular doctor was no longer covered. A new doctor was assigned but was never informed that she had a patient in the hospital having surgery. Without a primary care doctor to issue the discharge orders, the man was kept in the hospital for ten days before the miscommunication was discovered.



### **Treatment and care of patient.**

Complaints about treatment and care can range from being handled roughly to being given the wrong medication. These are often the type of complaints that lead clients to seek legal action against a caregiver.

**Complications because of poor care.** Complications, particularly those caused by neglect or carelessness can also send a client to the lawyer's office to discuss legal options. The two main complications that people complain about (and rightly so) include, hospital acquired infections and pressure ulcers.

**Having to wait for care.** Waiting can make people crazy. Whether you are sitting for hours in a waiting room, waiting for a doctor to call back with lab results or waiting for someone to answer your call bell, waiting makes every problem seem worse!

**Environmental problems (noise, odors).** A common complaint in hospitals and facilities is that it's too noisy. You've probably heard, "How is a person supposed to rest around here?"

**The food is terrible!** And finally, the last thing that people tend to complain about in the healthcare setting is the food! The food almost never lives up to the client's expectations. It's too bland, too hot, too cold, and too mushy. It's not what they ordered and/or it's not what they wanted!

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Now you know why people complain, and you're prepared to hear the most common complaints. But what will you do when someone complains **to you** or **about you**? You'll follow these four steps:

- ACTIVELY LISTEN**
- SINCERELY APOLOGIZE**
- SOLVE THE PROBLEM**
- EXPRESS GRATITUDE**

Over the next few pages, you'll learn how to use these four steps!

### STEP #1: ACTIVE LISTENING

***Did you know that hearing and listening are two different things?*** Hearing is passive. It happens whether we want it or not. Listening does not "just happen." It's an active choice you make to gather information and understand the messages of the speaker.

**There are both physical and verbal elements to active listening.**

- **Physically**, it's important to maintain eye contact, keep your body and posture relaxed, stand in a non-threatening position, nod and smile or frown (if appropriate).
- **Verbally**, wait until the speaker is completely finished talking before you speak. *Repeat the message* back to the person to make sure you understand correctly. *Ask questions* to gather more information or to get clarification.



**In addition, it's important to:**

- Remain neutral and non-judgmental. Do not offer excuses or take sides.
- Be patient. Pauses and short periods of silence allow the person who is complaining to organize his or her thoughts and be certain the complaint is fully expressed.
- Remember the important details from the conversation so that you can report the problem and take appropriate action. If the complaint is long and detailed, you may need to take notes to make sure you remember everything later.



## CONNECT IT!

### WHAT IS THE GOAL?

***What do you think people hope to achieve when they make a complaint?***

The most common goals people have when lodging a complaint are:

- To prevent the problem happening again.
- To be given a full explanation and feedback.
- To receive a meaningful apology.

***Think about a time when you formally complained about a service or product.***

- What was your goal?
- What was the outcome you expected?
- Did you get what you wanted or needed?
- What could have been done differently?
- How can you use your personal knowledge on this matter to improve your skills with clients?



## THE NEXT STEP!

### TO APOLOGIZE OR NOT?

In recent years, there has been a trend toward healthcare professionals telling the truth and apologizing for medical errors that occur to patients while under the care of the medical team.

It started out as a way to reduce the number of malpractice lawsuits brought on by disgruntled patients. But, the actual act of coming clean and expressing sincere regret can have a profound effect on everyone involved.

Some people think admitting wrongdoing is a sign of weakness. Others argue it is a sign of strength.

### What do you think?

- Is admitting you were wrong a sign of strength or a sign of weakness?
- What's your *personal* policy on apologizing?

## STEP #2: A SINCERE APOLOGY

Expressing an apology when things go wrong is more than just good manners, it is an important part of handling complaints. An apology demonstrates empathy and respect to the person. It can diffuse anger and prevent further misunderstandings.

An apology cannot change what happened, but if it is sincere, it can begin to help undo the negative effects at the root of the complaint.

### A meaningful apology contains the 3 Rs, and sends a message of:

- **R**esponsibility. A meaningful apology must contain some sort of recognition of fault.
- **R**egret. To be sincere, an apology must show that you feel bad (or regret) that the situation happened.
- **R**emedy. This is where you let the person know what action you will take in response to the complaint.

**Here is an example:** A woman arrived unannounced to visit her mother, who is immobile and incontinent. She immediately noticed a foul smell and after a quick investigation, discovered her mother lying in a soiled brief.

She is steaming mad when she approaches you. This is not the first time she's found her mother this way. She tells you, "This is unacceptable. We pay good money to have our mother taken care of. This is your job. Why can't you just DO your job?"

- ⇒ **The apology:** "I'm so sorry this happened. And you're right. It's unacceptable to leave an incontinent woman in a soiled brief for any length of time. I will clean her up right now and make sure there isn't any skin breakdown.
- ⇒ **What's NOT in an apology?** Excuses and defensive comebacks have no part in an apology.
  - For example, even if you just checked on the woman five minutes earlier and found her clean, it's not helpful to whine or say, "But I just checked on her. She couldn't have been like this longer than five minutes."
  - An apology also should not try to shift blame. In other words, it's not helpful to blame the client by saying something like, "Ms. B, why didn't you tell me you messed yourself?" It's also inappropriate to blame another staff member (even if it's their fault). Take responsibility as a team and then speak to your co-worker in private about the complaint.





## STEP #3: SOLVE THE PROBLEM

It's always best, when possible, to solve the problem as soon as it arises. So, after following the first two steps, listening and apologizing, it's time to take some action.

**Do what you can right away.** Simple complaints about food, temperature, noise and wait times can usually be addressed right away. More serious complaints, such as billing concerns, problems with other staff members, complaints from family members about overall care of their loved ones will need further investigation.

⇒ Keep in mind, taking action doesn't always mean **you** will fix the problem yourself. You may not be in a position to "fix" every problem. Sometimes taking action means you will take the problem to your supervisor (or other appropriate person) to help solve the problem. Just remember to follow up with your supervisor to make sure the problem is solved for your client.

**Estimate a timeline.** Give the person a clear time frame in which the complaint will be addressed. For example, if the person complains that she is supposed to get physical therapy three times a week but she hasn't seen the physical therapist in a week, let her know you will contact the therapist within the hour and keep her updated on what you learn.

⇒ Even though you have no control over what the physical therapist does, you are responding to the complaint and doing what you can to "fix" it for the client. When people get a response to their complaint, they often see this as a sign that their concerns are being taken seriously.

**Keep the client informed.** If the problem takes longer than an hour to resolve, keep the client informed of what's happening. This can keep the complaint from elevating or getting worse.



⇒ Here's an example of what could go wrong. A client recently had lab tests done to determine which antibiotic he would need to clear his infection. He was told he'd have results by the afternoon. By dinner time, he still did not have results. He complained to the nurse about it. She said she would look into it. When the nurse called the lab, she learned that his blood would need to be cultured overnight to isolate the organism. But the nurse never went back and told the client this. By 9 pm, the man was enraged and threatening to call a lawyer to "sue everyone in the organization" for delaying his treatment.



## THINK ABOUT IT!

### WHAT SHOULD JEAN HAVE DONE?

Remember Jean, the CNA from the beginning of this inservice?

Looking at the situation from her perspective, you can see how she may have just come on duty. Maybe the "escape" happened during the change of shift.

Jean felt ambushed and attacked. It clearly wasn't her fault that Miss Rose wandered.

### But what could Jean have done to handle the complaint better?

- Did Jean take the time to really listen to the fear in the daughter's voice?
- Could Jean have apologized on behalf of the team and the organization?
- What other solutions might Jean have given besides sending the woman off to find the nursing supervisor?





## GET OUT!

### THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX!

*Working with clients in the home often requires coming up with creative solutions to uncommon problems.*

- **THE PROBLEM:** Mr. Higgins was told he'd have an aide visit him every day. However, you were assigned to care for him Monday thru Friday. When no one visits him on the weekend he starts making calls to complain.
- By Monday morning he is in a rage and wants to fire you because no one has called him back or visited for two whole days.
- **WHAT YOU KNOW:** You know Mr. Higgins likely misunderstood that "every day" excluded weekends.
- **GET CREATIVE:** Think of 3 creative solutions you could try to restore Mr. Higgins trust and resolve his complaint.
- **TALK ABOUT IT:** Share your ideas with your co-workers and supervisor and find out how they would solve the problem.

## STEP #4: EXPRESS GRATITUDE

**Complaints contain valuable lessons.** If no one ever tells you what you are doing wrong, than you might do something wrong forever. But if someone complains, then you know it's wrong and you have the opportunity to fix it.

- ⇒ **Here's an example.** Mandy, a CNA for in a long term care facility, enjoyed helping senior women feel good about themselves by washing and styling their hair. When the residents heard there was a person on staff that would do this for them, they began requesting visits from her. Mandy felt good, and even made time on her days off to "volunteer" to help the women.
- ⇒ After a few weeks, the women stopped asking Mandy to come. Mandy felt confused and hurt. She had one appointment left. During the appointment, the woman yelled and told Mandy she was too rough.
- ⇒ As it turned out, no one else wanted to complain because Mandy was so sweet. But the fact was that Mandy was too rough with the women. The brush she used was too stiff and she pushed too hard and pulled their hair.
- ⇒ **Mandy had a few choices at this point:**
  - She could get defensive and say, "Well it was free anyway, they had no right to complain."
  - She could get sad and discouraged. Or...
  - She could thank the woman for bringing up the problem. She could learn from her mistake and move forward using a gentler approach.

***It's difficult to think that a complaint could be helpful, but most are!*** Most complaints can help you give better care and help you learn how to communicate better with clients and/or your team.

If one person complains about something, you can be pretty sure there are at least five other people who have the same problem but are too meek, shy, or easy-going to complain about it.

So, the next time a client complains, try thanking her for taking the time to bring the issue to your attention.



## IF THE SITUATION SEEMS DANGEROUS

There may be times when a person becomes so frustrated with a situation that he or she threatens you or becomes violent.

Depending on the person's tolerance level, having complaints go unheard or unresolved can lead one to quickly reach "the end of his rope."

If you are dealing with a client or family member who has become enraged, follow these simple guidelines:

**Be a good role model.** If you get angry or aggressive because of a client's behavior, it will only make the situation worse.

**Your behavior can control the situation.** If you encounter a client who is yelling or making demands, try to:

- Speak slowly and calmly.
- Listen to what they are saying. Don't tease or ignore them.
- Don't crowd him.
- Don't let him back you into a corner.
- Avoid touching angry clients unless you know from past experience that touching them is safe.

**Sit on it!** Try to get a hostile person to sit down, if possible. (Most people are less aggressive when they are seated.) You might say, *"Please, have a seat while I go get my Supervisor."*



**Clients have rights.** Remember, your clients have the right to complain. While the chosen method of delivery of the complaint may be aggressive, the complaint still must be heard and acted upon.

**You have rights too.** Yes, clients have a right to complain, but you also have a right to work

in a safe environment. If you feel threatened, get out. If you think the person will listen, you might try saying calmly, *"I know you are upset, but I don't deserve to be treated this way."*

**Report the incident.** Remember, patient complaints must in no way make a difference on how they are treated or keep them from getting medical care in the future. But reporting the incident can alert future caregivers to the potential that this person may become difficult or combative.



## TALK ABOUT IT!

Most healthcare providers have a policy and procedure in place to handle complaints.

Do you know your employer's policy? If not ask your supervisor for a copy today.

**If no policy is in place, then ask your supervisor the following questions:**

- What should I do if a client complains about the organization?
- What procedure should I follow if a client complains about another caregiver?
- Where should I turn for help if a client complains about billing, post op care, medications, insurance problems, etc..
- Think about other complaints that have come up. Ask your supervisor how each should have been handled.



## FIVE KEY POINTS!

### REVIEW WHAT YOU LEARNED!

1. Hearing and responding to complaints can be difficult, especially if you feel like you are being attacked for something you didn't do. But your response can make all the difference in how the situation turns out.
2. The #1 reason people complain is because they have certain expectations about how things are "supposed" to be—and those expectations are not met.
3. All patients have the right to voice complaints regarding their care.
4. The four steps to handling complaints are to: actively listen, sincerely apologize, solve the problem, and express gratitude.
5. The quicker a complaint is resolved, the less likely it is to escalate into something much worse.

## COMPLAINTS FROM YOUR "BOSS"

Complaints from clients are one thing, but getting a complaint from your boss is completely different. Complaints from clients are often a result a problem with the team. It is rarely a personal attack against you. But a complaint from your boss may feel very personal.

Complaints from your boss may come during a performance review. If this is the case, follow these simple steps to resolve the issue:

- **Stay calm** and avoid becoming defensive. If you feel angry or feel tears rising, **ask if you can be excused** to get a sip of water. This will give you a chance to settle yourself and plan your response.
- **Ask for clarification, if necessary.** For example, you might say, *"I want to make sure I understand."* Then repeat back what you think you heard.
- **Admit your surprise.** If you feel blindsided by the complaint, you can say, *"I guess I need your feedback more often. I did not know there were concerns about my performance."*
- **Acknowledge the problem and agree to find a solution.**
- **Avoid the blame game.** It may be tempting to hurl the blame back on your supervisor, but remember, the complaint is about your performance.
  - ⇒ For instance, if your supervisor is complaining that your paperwork is never in on time, you may be tempted to say, *"Well, if we weren't always short staffed, I might be able to finish on time."*
  - ⇒ While being short staffed may be the case, there are better ways to make your point without being defensive. A better answer may be, *"Yes, I know my paperwork is often late. I have a heavy caseload, and my clients' care is important to me. I like to make sure everyone is completely taken care of before I tend to paperwork. This means I'm late most days."*
- **Work together towards a solution.** Ask your supervisor for suggestions on how to improve your performance. It may mean that you need further training in a particular area. Or you may need to brush up on your time management or customer service skills. Whatever the case, find a solution and then take steps to fix the problem.
- **Follow-up.** Just like following up with clients on the complaints they make, you need to follow-up with your supervisor. Ask for a meeting or request another review after a few months have passed. Be prepared to report all the steps you have taken to fix the situation.







Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time

## A Communications Module: Handling Complaints

**Are you "In the Know" about handling complaints? Circle the best choice or fill in your answer. Then check your answers with your supervisor!**

- The number one reason people complain is because they:**
  - A. Are miserable.
  - B. Seek attention.
  - C. Have unmet expectations.
  - D. None of the above.
- Which of the following is NOT one of the four steps to handling complaints?**
  - A. Listen Actively.
  - B. Identify whose fault it is.
  - C. Apologize.
  - D. Solve the problem.
- Your client tells you she is unhappy with the care she receives from another staff member but she's afraid to complain because she doesn't want it to affect the care she receives from everyone else. You should:**
  - A. Advise her to keep the complaint to herself.
  - B. Urge her to discuss it with the person she has the problem with.
  - C. Stop giving her special attention before she complains about you.
  - D. Remind her that she is protected under the Patient's Bill of Rights.
- Most people complain in order to:**
  - A. Receive a meaningful apology.
  - B. Prevent the problem from happening again.
  - C. Be given a full explanation and feedback.
  - D. All of the above.
- True or False**  
Some people are chronically unhappy, and unhappy people tend to complain.
- True or False**  
It's a sign of weakness to apologize for a mistake or admit you were wrong.
- True or False**  
It's never okay to ignore a complaint.
- True or False**  
After billing errors, the most common complaint clients have is about food.
- True or False**  
The 3 R's in an apology are Re-state, Reject and Re-judge.
- True or False**  
Resolved complaints are less likely it is to snowball into something worse.

EMPLOYEE NAME  
(Please print):

\_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

- I understand the information presented in this inservice.**
- I have completed this inservice and answered at least eight of the test questions correctly.**

EMPLOYEE SIGNATURE:

\_\_\_\_\_

SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE:

\_\_\_\_\_

### Inservice Credit:

<input type="checkbox"/> Self Study	1 hour
<input type="checkbox"/> Group Study	1 hour

**File completed test  
in employee's  
personnel file.**