

Maintaining Situational Awareness to Support Patient Safety

Question

Why is situational awareness necessary in healthcare, and what are some strategies that teams can use to stay focused?

Answer

Situational awareness is a fundamental skill for all healthcare team members in providing safe patient care. Team members should stay attuned to the patient, each other, and their immediate surroundings because conditions continually evolve.¹ By remaining aware, each team member helps monitor the situation, pinpoint and resolve issues, control stress, and support the patient and family/caregivers.

In an environment where staff rotates, workloads increase, patients' needs develop, and pressing decisions must be made, healthcare teams that display situational awareness can discover early warning signs of patient complications, collaborate smoothly with others, lessen cognitive overload and stress, avert diagnostic errors, and communicate coherently and positively.² However, when teams are not situationally aware, consequences may include medical errors, treatment delays, and communication failures as a result.³

Situational awareness involves three stages: perception (identifying cues), comprehension (understanding what is being seen and what needs to be done), and projection (predicting what will happen and deciding what to do).⁴ Demonstrating situational awareness involves healthcare team members doing the following:

- Exchanging vital information with each other.
- Asking questions and requesting explanations if uncertain.

- Directing observations/comments to the proper team member.
- Involve patients and family/caregivers in pertinent conversations.
- Include visual tools.
- Document promptly and maintain access to documentation.
- Learn the care plan and any modifications.
- Inform team members of any changes in roles or treatment.
- Acknowledge when team members may be distracted or overwhelmed.⁵

One way healthcare team members can learn skills to attain situational awareness is with the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's TeamSTEPPS® situation monitoring tools:

- [STEP](#) (patient status)
- [I'M SAFE Checklist](#) (team member status)
- [Cross-Monitoring](#) (status of environment and other team members)
- [STAR](#) (status of specific activities or tasks)
- [The Five "Whats" of Diagnostic Reflective Practice: Know, Alternatives, Information, Consequences, Steps](#) (accurate diagnosis)⁶

More useful tools include the SHEEP model (Systems, Human interaction, Environment, Equipment, and Personnel) that assesses:

- What is happening now?
- Why does it matter?
- What should I do next?⁷

When a team member becomes distracted or fixated on a task, team members can use approaches such as NUT (Notice, Understand, Think Ahead), PACE (Probe, Alert, Challenge, Emergency), and CUSS (Concerned, Uncomfortable, Serious Situation, Stop).⁸

To sustain team members' focus, the theater cap challenge (each team member learns every other team member's name), the sterile cockpit rule (allow no interruptions or distractions), and team check-ins (identify any team member that is physically or mentally unwell) can be helpful.⁹

Healthcare leaders can develop a structured approach to strengthen team members' understanding of situational awareness and lessen potential risks. Strategies include:

- Foster a culture of safety in which healthcare team members may come forward with any safety concerns and ask questions without fear of retribution.
- Consider using checklists and **tools** that foster standardized and collaborative communication among team members.
- Keep current on new ways to maintain situational awareness, including techniques, technologies, and research findings. Hold workshops, coach team members, and cross-train them across disciplines within the healthcare environment.
- Train healthcare team members on mindfulness, cognitive skill development, and nontechnical skill development (e.g., teamwork, conflict management, and decision-making). Include mental exercises, guided practice, breathing exercises, focus drills, and realistic examples.
- Use simulation-based training to help team members see patterns, identify what is most important, and decide on the next step in a stressful environment.
- Give team members immersive activities that require fast decision-making so they can gain experience through repetition.
- **Debrief** with team members after a situation to discuss what needs to be improved.
- Develop shared mental models to support mutual understanding, improved communication and coordination, alignment of goals and expectations, and effective decision-making.¹⁰

Endnotes

¹ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2023, May). *Section 2: Explanation of key concepts and tools*. Retrieved from www.ahrq.gov/teamstepps-program/curriculum/situation/tools/index.html

² Quality Leaders Academy. (n.d.). *Situational awareness in healthcare*. Retrieved from www.qualityleadersacademy.com/situational-awareness-in-healthcare

³ Ibid.

⁴ TOBII. (2026, April 8). *The power of situational awareness*. Retrieved from www.tobii.com/blog/the-power-of-situational-awareness

⁵ Quality Leaders Academy, *Situational awareness in healthcare*

⁶ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Section 2: Explanation of key concepts and tools*

⁷ Quality Leaders Academy, *Situational awareness in healthcare*.

⁸ RCVS Knowledge. (2022, September 1). *Situational awareness: A vital skill to ensure patient safety*. Retrieved from www.rcvsknowledge.org/resource/situational-awareness-a-vital-skill-to-ensure-patient-safety/

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quality Leaders Academy, *Situational awareness in healthcare*; TOBII, *The power of situational awareness*; Quality Leaders Academy, *Situational awareness in healthcare*; RCVS Knowledge, *Situational awareness: A vital skill to ensure patient safety*.

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