Preventing No-Shows in Your Acupuncture Office
Everything You Need to Reduce No-Shows, Deal with Missed Appointments, and Handle Awkward Conversations

1) CREATE YOUR NO-SHOW POLICY

☐ How much will you charge? $________

Considerations:
☐ The most you can charge is the cost of the missed treatment itself = $________
☐ You could charge the cost of their copay if they would have paid with insurance
☐ I would recommend $25 be the least that you charge for no-shows
☐ What do other acupuncturists in your area charge for no-shows?
Call or email three nearby acupuncturists:
1. $________
2. $________
3. $________
☐ What are you comfortable charging for no-shows? $________

☐ How many hours advance notice is required for cancellations? ___________ hours

☐ Depends on how quickly you can fill the appointment with another patient
☐ Do you have a waiting list of patients each week who want to get in to see you ASAP but didn’t schedule far enough in advance?

☐ The longer your wait list, the shorter your advance notice can be.
For example, if you regularly have 5-10 patients on a wait list, then a 12-hour advance notice cancellation policy might work out fine; you can call your wait list patients that morning and are likely to find a paying patient to fill the time slot

☐ No wait list? Consider at least 24 hours

☐ What to say in your no-show policy? Feel free to steal mine:

Missed Appointment and Cancellation Policy:
Please note that at least 24-hour advance notice is required for all cancelled appointments. If you do not contact Ageless Acupuncture at least 24 hours in advance to cancel your appointment, you will be charged a fee of $35. Missed appointments with no prior notice at all will also be charged $35. Thank you for your cooperation.
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2) Handling Those Awkward Conversations:

☐ The patient is 10 minutes late and is NOT a chronic no-show:

☒ Phone call if the patient picks up:

“Hi Stephanie, this is Michelle from Ageless Acupuncture. I have you down for an acupuncture appointment at 1:00. Will you still be able to make it?”

>>> Answers, “No, I totally forgot and I’m so sorry! I’m mortified!”

Or she is sick or had an emergency of some kind.

“That’s okay, it happens. I do have a $35 cancellation fee for missed appointments but since it’s your first one and it was an accident, I can waive the fee for you this time.”

☒ Leave a message if the patient doesn’t pick up:

“Hi Stephanie, this is Michelle from Ageless Acupuncture. I had you down for an acupuncture appointment at 1:00. It’s about 1:10, so maybe you’re just running behind and I’ll see you soon. If not, I do have a $35 cancellation fee for missed appointments. But since this hasn’t happened before I can waive the fee for you this time.”

☐ The patient is 10 minutes late and frequently cancels last minute or no-shows:

☒ Phone call if the patient picks up:

“Hi Stephanie, this is Michelle from Ageless Acupuncture. I have you down for an acupuncture appointment at 1:00. Will you still be able to make it?”

>>> Answers, “No, I can’t come in today.”

“Okay, I’m sorry to hear that. I do have a $35 cancellation fee for missed appointments. I waivered your first missed appointment fee so our policy states that I’ll have to send you an invoice for this one. Unless you think you can make it in in the next 10 minutes?”

You can say “our” even if it’s just you running the whole office. “Our” takes a little pressure off of you and makes it sound less like you as an individual are reprimanding them for being late. Instead it comes across as just a “policy” that lots of offices have.

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2) Handling Those Awkward Conversations:

☐ The patient is 10 minutes late and frequently cancels last minute or no-shows:

(Continued)

☐ Leave a message if the patient doesn’t pick up:

“Hi Stephanie, this is Michelle from Ageless Acupuncture. I had you down for an acupuncture appointment at 1:00. It’s 1:10, so maybe you’re just running behind and I’ll see you soon. If you can’t make it, I do have a $35 cancellation fee for missed appointments. I waived your first missed appointment fee so our policy states that I’ll have to send you an invoice for this one, unless it’s an emergency. Please give me a call when you get a chance.”

Considerations (because I know this is a tough phone call for many of us):

• If the patient often no-shows or cancels with very little warning (less than whatever your policy is), then they really do deserve a little tough love. Your office doesn’t exist to cater to them and their timeline. So you need to say the difficult words that you’re going to charge them.

• In this script you acknowledge that it could be an emergency that’s preventing them from being there, and you ask them to call you. That way they have the opportunity to explain themselves, if it was an emergency.

• If they call you with an explanation, then at that point you have to decide whether to charge them the fee, if they have what feels like a valid reason.

• If you were happy/relieved to just leave a message and don’t want to discuss their reason for no-showing, then stop the script right after telling them you will be sending them an invoice. That’s up to you.

• Chances are, if this person is chronically cancelling last minute on you, they’re cancelling last minute for other appointments, too, and are not surprised to be charged for it.

• Remember: Other medical offices regularly charge a fee for missed appointments and are firm about it. They’re busy and don’t have time to mess around. You’re allowed to project the same message (politely, of course): That you’re busy and don’t have time for people who don’t respect your time.
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2) Handling Those Awkward Conversations:

☐ A patient who frequently no-shows (more than 3 times) calls to make an appointment, and you’ve decided that you can’t afford to give them a slot on your schedule anymore:

○ The patient misses her third appointment with no warning, so you call to leave a message giving her a heads up that:
  1) She missed the appointment, and
  2) She won’t be able to schedule an appointment in advance with you, because of her track record.

What would that phone call or voicemail sound like?

“Hi Stephanie, this is Michelle from Ageless Acupuncture. I had you down for an appointment at 1:00 today but didn’t see you at the office. We have a policy that patients who miss three or more appointments without letting me know ahead of time can’t schedule future appointments in advance. You can still call the day of to see if I have any openings, but I can’t reserve a time for you in my schedule because I have so many other patients waiting to get in. But I’d still love for you to call the day of to see if I have anything open. Feel free to call me with questions. Have a great day.”

Considerations:

• Emphasize that you would still like to see her and give her treatments. All she has to do is call on the day she wants to come in, to see if you have any openings available.

• You are NOT telling her that she can’t come to your office anymore, or that you don’t want to be her acupuncturist.

Things to Remember About Scripts:

➢ I don’t usually advocate scripts or a one-size-fits-all policy with marketing. Everyone is different and what works and feels comfortable to me may not be the same for you.

➢ So use these scripts as a springboard. Test them out. Read them aloud with friends/family and ask them – what would they change? What would sound more natural for you to say? How would you word it? Would you get your point across entirely differently? That’s totally fine. As long as you make your point, are crystal clear, are professional and firm. (Note: You can be firm but gentle when you deliver information like this. That’s fine.)
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3) Preventing No-Shows Checklist:

☐ Create or update your cancellation/no-show policy:
  ☐ How much will you charge? $__________
  ☐ How many hours advance notice are required for cancellations? _________

☐ Add your cancellation policy to your initial patient paperwork
  ☐ Decide whether you’ll require each patient to sign that they agree with the policy

☐ Add your cancellation policy to the back of your business card, under the appointment reminder section

☐ Create handouts of the policy to give to all patients (old and new) as they come in for treatment.
  (Just a friendly, “Hey, letting you know one of our policies has changed,” is fine.)

☐ Make signs with the policy for your office:
  ☐ Front desk
  ☐ In each treatment room and/or in the bathroom
  ☐ Keep signs up for at least 4-6 weeks to let all your regular patients rotate through

☐ If you have an email newsletter for your patients, send out a friendly email about the new policy

☐ Consider mentioning the new no-show policy on office voicemail for a few weeks

☐ Practice scripts (read them out loud) before making the phone call

☐ Remember:

  ➢ **Be Clear:** The clearer you are about the policy from the beginning, the easier it will be to put it to use. Everyone should be well aware of the policy by that point, so it won’t be a surprise.

  ➢ **A Cancellation Policy is Justified:** Most medical offices have a firm, unapologetic cancellation policy. They’re not worried about using it because they’re clear about it from the beginning. People are rarely offended or surprised by a cancellation policy because they’re considered standard practice.

  ➢ **You Can Be Flexible:** It’s up to you to decide when to use your cancellation policy. If you feel like a patient deserves a break, or you want to give them another chance, then just remind them that your policy exists, and let them know you’re cutting them a break and not charging them.

  ➢ Sometimes just having the policy in the first place keeps patients on their toes and prevents them from missing appointment or even being late. You may not even have to enforce it very often. As long as it exists to remind people to be respectful of your time.