



Enhancing Therapeutic Alliance and Promoting Shared Decision Making

Why effective communication and collaboration between patients and healthcare professionals matters

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Introduction

The therapeutic alliance between patient and healthcare professional (HCP) plays a key role in patient self-management of chronic conditions

The doctor-patient relationship has long been recognized as a key component in achieving quality healthcare and positive health outcomes.^{1,3} Also referred to as 'working alliance' or 'therapeutic alliance', a good relationship between a patient and HCP must aim to achieve synergy between patient and HCP.¹ In this paper we will use the single term 'therapeutic alliance' for consistency.

Exploring the value of therapeutic alliance

Therapeutic alliance is a professional relationship which focuses on achieving agreement between the HCP and patient on:

- the treatment goals
- steps the patient must follow to achieve their treatment goals
- the degree of trust and emotional bond between the HCP and patient.¹⁵

Collaborative communication and shared decision making is at the core of a good therapeutic alliance.¹ This approach can be used to identify a patient's perspective of their condition, allowing for better and more efficient assessment and treatment.⁶

This collaborative relationship recognizes the importance of input from the patient, who is respected to make decisions and choices about their own health.⁷

By building a strong therapeutic alliance that considers the patient's needs and preferences, the patient takes a more active role in their treatment, and the self-management of their condition.³

Good therapeutic alliance has been associated with a range of patient-related factors, including:

- adherence
- health outcome expectations
- HCP and patient satisfaction.⁸

Doctors receive some basic training in communication, but there is an opportunity and a need to support HCPs further in building therapeutic alliance¹ by offering tools and resources to support and enhance the relationship. This support can help both the patient and the HCP by reducing communication barriers, guiding the interaction, and ultimately improving the patient's health and wellbeing.

Cultivating the HCP-patient connection

The model consultation

The evolution of patient-centered care has highlighted the need for a broader perspective of treatment that considers not just biological factors, but also psychological, social, and cultural ones too.^{9,10} A useful framework to understand these factors, and their role within the consultation, is Leventhal's self-regulatory model,¹¹ which can be used to create a 'biopsychosocial consultation'. In this model, HCPs offer physical and behavioral care, as well as emotional and cognitive support.

Emotional care describes ways in which an HCP can reduce unhelpful emotions such as fear and anxiety, by providing support and reassurance, while showing empathy and warmth.²

Cognitive care refers to the ways HCPs can shape patients' core beliefs about their treatment and condition.²

Emotions and cognitions play a significant role in patients' behavior, in relation to managing their health and illness; incorporating these dimensions into the consultation can have a strong influence on overall outcomes.

Biopsychosocial consultation²



Physical care - Provision of treatment



Behavioral care - Guidance on how to perform a behavior



Emotional care - Showing empathy and warmth; providing reassurance



Cognitive care - Addressing illness and treatment perceptions

During a biopsychosocial consultation, there are a range of behaviors needed from the HCP to ensure high quality care. These have been arranged into six core behavioral functions:¹²

1. Fostering the relationship
2. Gathering information
3. Providing information
4. Making decisions
5. Responding to emotions
6. Enabling disease-and-treatment-related behaviors

By using these behaviors, the HCP is able to shape the way patients think and feel about their illness or treatment.² This may have a lasting impact on their behavior in relation to treatment and overall self-management.

Insights from an experienced nurse at Atlantis Healthcare



Terry McLaughlin is a nurse supervisor at Atlantis Healthcare. He provides frontline patient support and guidance to individuals with chronic and acute illnesses.

How is a good therapeutic alliance established?

During initial consultation with a patient, it helps to have a clear and open discussion about the effects of their condition. Our job is to show how prescribed medication could help them to manage their illness. Having an honest conversation about perceived noted side effects, and how they can be best managed, may give some individuals a

sense of control. This can help them to develop a plan of action. Ensuring the patient has a realistic expectation of their medication can also help to increase the chances of adherence.

What should be the key focus of a good therapeutic alliance?

Establishing a joint ownership of treatment decisions and management is important. This

unofficial contract of 'commitment to the medication' can help give it the best possible chance of making a difference.

What can getting it right achieve?

A good therapeutic alliance provides the optimum chance for a prescribed medication to do its job. If successful, it can also lead to improved quality of life, as well as emotional and psychological benefits.

Building therapeutic alliance



Physical care:

Shared decision making

Physical care includes understanding a patient's physical experience, conducting diagnostic

tests, and providing treatment. A key element in physical care is shared decision making.¹ This is characterized as "a negotiation between patient and HCP, where both share their respective views and agree on a plan that is ethical, based on evidence, and congruent with the patient's preferences".¹³ A meta-analysis has shown that interventions which support shared decision making can significantly improve outcomes for disadvantaged patients.¹⁴



Behavioral care:

Agreement on goals and actions

Behavioral care is the guidance on how to perform a behavior,

particularly in relation to treatment and self-management. Setting goals and reaching mutual agreement on the actions required to achieve them is vital to building therapeutic alliance.

Goal setting has been found to be a valid measure of patient outcomes.¹⁸ Several goal-setting approaches can be used in consultation with a patient, such as staff-directed, patient-devised, and mutually agreed goals or scaling of goals.

Physical care - The challenge

Establishing a relationship that incorporates a shared decision making model requires advanced communication skills.^{15, 16} HCPs are not always offered the time or opportunity to develop these communication skills and so can be challenged when trying to establish therapeutic alliance.

In a study of orthopedic surgeons, 75% of those surveyed believed that they communicated satisfactorily with their patients. However, only 21% of the patients reported satisfactory communication with their doctors.¹⁷

Behavioral care - The challenge

Goal setting is a useful and reliable tool to use in a consultation; however, it may not always be implemented in a clear and structured way for patients. HCPs sometimes lack the resources required to support patients in setting clear and defined goals, defining actions required to achieve these goals, and identifying ways to track their behavior over time.



Emotional care: Trust and empathy

Emotional care is emerging as a core element in the therapeutic relationship.

It has been found that HCPs who have a warm, friendly, and reassuring manner are more effective than those who keep their interactions impersonal and formal.¹⁹⁻²¹ Research suggests that trust is an essential component in emotional care.¹ With an increasing focus on partnership and shared decision making, trust is crucial in successfully building this collaborative approach.²² Research has also shown cultivation of trust between HCP and patient can result in improved treatment adherence, increased satisfaction, and positive treatment outcomes.^{22, 23}

Emotional care - The challenge

HCPs can often default to 'blocking' or trying to avoid patients' expressions of emotional concerns and distress. This is not necessarily due to a lack of sympathy, but rather because they may be uncomfortable speaking about emotions.²⁴ HCPs may also be unable to deal with their own emotions following this type of interaction.²⁵ However, this avoidance does not allow the potentially empathetic nature of the relationship to develop. Therefore, there is an opportunity to better support HCPs by increasing their personal resources to deal with 'emotionally distressing' interactions and providing them with the skills to effectively support the 'emotional' patient.



Cognitive care: Eliciting and addressing underlying beliefs

Patient values and beliefs about their health, illness and

treatment can influence their behavior. In order to build therapeutic alliance, it is important that HCPs can identify and address patient beliefs and feel confident in addressing these. This can help with removing any barriers to successful self-management.²⁶

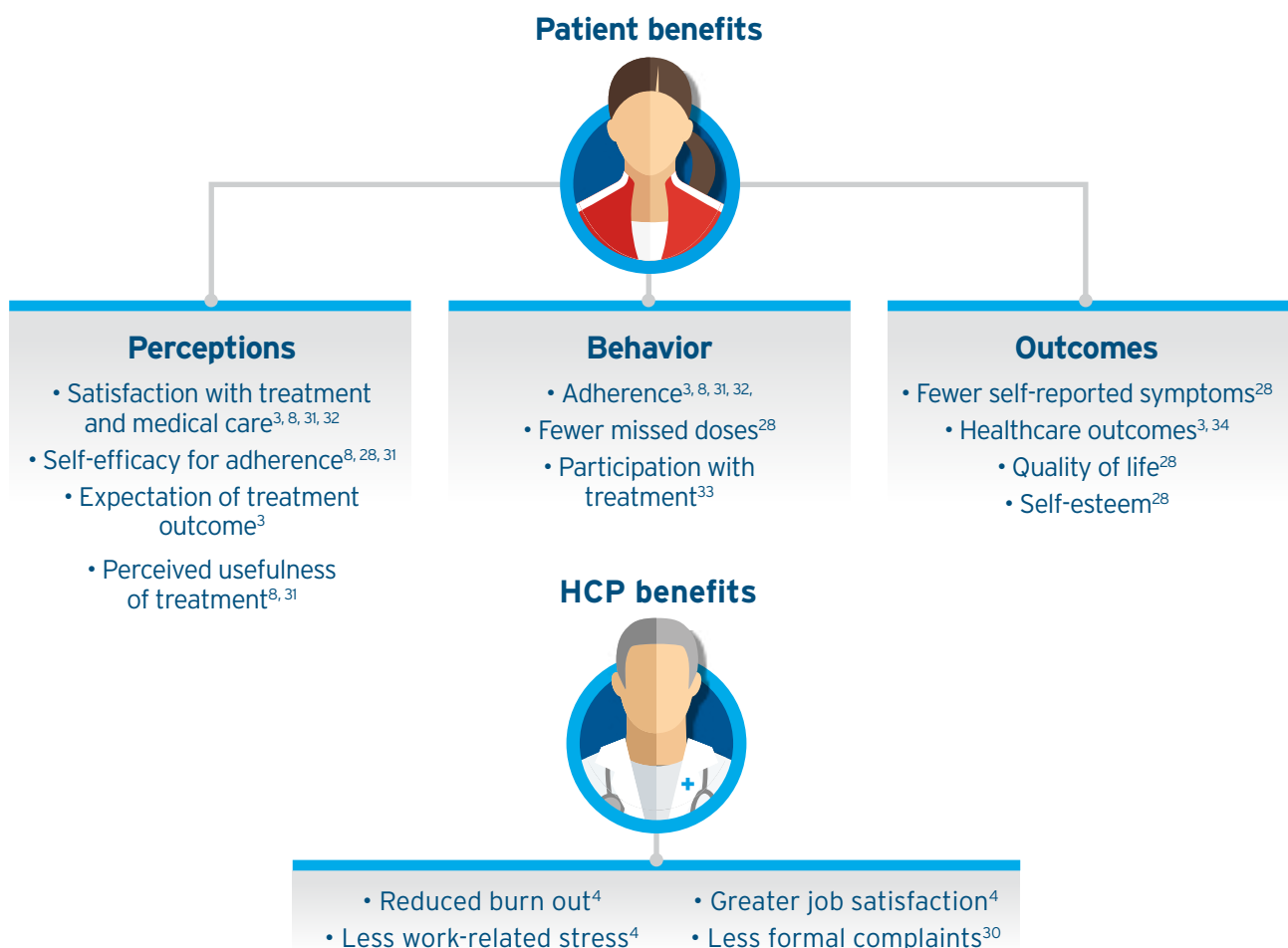
Cognitive care - The challenge

Within a consultation, HCPs can face challenges with non-disclosure of information from patients, which prevents them understanding underlying beliefs about the condition and treatment. Patients are also not always aware of their beliefs, or how these beliefs might be influencing their behavior - so they don't raise them for discussion. HCPs can find it difficult therefore, to elicit key discussion topics, and address the underlying issues.

What are the benefits of a strong therapeutic alliance?

A strong therapeutic alliance has been shown to have a positive impact on both patient and HCP outcomes. A meta-analysis found medium to large effect sizes between therapeutic alliance and a range of patient factors including patient perceptions, patient behavior, and patient outcomes.¹

Strong therapeutic alliance has been found to lead to a number of benefits:



What can therapeutic alliance achieve?⁷

- ✓ Regulation of patients' emotions
- ✓ Improved comprehension of medical information
- ✓ Better identification of patients' needs, perceptions, and expectations
- ✓ Early identification of potential problems
- ✓ Improved self-management - and ultimately - clinical outcomes

Identifying support solutions to enhance therapeutic alliance

Support solutions can be developed to help HCPs overcome challenges faced in developing strong therapeutic alliance. Tools, training and resources can be used to help elicit key issues and provide guidance on how to discuss and address issues that arise. These support solutions can also help HCPs become equipped with the skills required to communicate effectively.

Behavior change interventions can support HCPs to overcome challenges

Research suggests a range of support solutions can be introduced to help enhance therapeutic alliance and subsequently improve a range of outcomes.¹

Areas that can be targeted by support solutions¹



Guiding discussion



Communication skills
(e.g. motivational interviewing)



Promoting collaborative communication



Guidance on identifying and addressing patient beliefs



Structured goal setting, agreement, monitoring and follow-up



Fostering trust and empathy

Insights from a health psychology specialist at Atlantis Healthcare

Kate Perry is director of behavioral science at Atlantis Healthcare US. She is responsible for clinical strategy, as well as the research behind, and implementation of, patient support programs.

What barriers do pharma-sponsored initiatives face with the patient-HCP relationship?

Firstly, there are structural barriers, which can be difficult to overcome as they can require system-wide change. These could be factors such as lack of time within a consultation, or having a noisy and distracting clinical environment. Other barriers relate to patient or HCP factors - for example lack of patient understanding, or clinician consultation style.

How can pharma overcome these issues?

Pharma already recognizes the importance of overcoming these barriers and supporting more effective communication between patient and HCPs. Here in the US,

patients are routinely provided with predefined discussion guides, or question and answer sheets, designed to encourage patient-HCP communication. While these materials are likely to have some impact for some patients, they are only part of the answer.

How can pharma-sponsored materials be improved to further support positive patient-HCP relationships?

The first issue with many existing pharma-sponsored materials is that they're often very medically or factually focused. This positioning fails to provide the patient with the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings about their diagnosis and treatment. Health psychology

research demonstrates that these kinds of patient perspectives are critical to understanding how they will respond to doctors' recommendations.

In addition, these materials are often designed purely to enhance a patient's knowledge by providing information and education. While the research literature and experience shows us that knowledge is important, it is not enough by itself to change behavior. Patients also require the skills to support good communication and relationship building. Initiatives that can provide patients with an opportunity to practise these skills and to provide feedback on their performance further enhance their ability to apply them.

Case Study: A discussion guide to enhance therapeutic alliance

Facilitating adherence discussions and supporting HCPs to address patient needs



Background

The purpose of this discussion guide was to help HCPs identify rheumatology patients who were sub-optimally managed on their current treatment. The aim was support HCPs to assess, predict and address nonadherent behavior.

The challenge

- To facilitate open dialogue between patients and HCPs relating to medication nonadherence in rheumatoid arthritis, with a focus on disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)
- To assist healthcare professionals in delivering personalized intervention support as part of usual care
- To help identify and address drivers of nonadherence

The solution

This support solution was developed based on the published literature in health psychology. The literature was used to identify challenges faced in this patient population, and understand drivers of nonadherence with a key focus on patient beliefs. This research was used by health psychology specialists and a consumer-focused creative communications team to develop an engaging, easy-to-use and effective discussion guide.

What the guide comprises:

- A 7-question screener 'quiz' to help identify key topics for discussion
- Tabular quick reference guides, based on screener responses to frame the discussion and for the patient to read at home
- Notes pages to help with information retention and personalizing the advice
- Tools to help monitor behavior

Supporting the consultation

This guide supports the HCP across the four dimensions of the biopsychosocial consultation, enhancing the therapeutic alliance, by facilitating the early identification of potential problems and promoting shared decision making.

Physical care

- ✓ Simple quick questions to support the HCP to assess experiences of condition and treatment
- ✓ Quick reference guides to support HCP and patient discussion of difficult topics
- ✓ A 'Pros and cons' problem solving challenge
- ✓ Sections to record experience of side effects and general concerns between consultations
- ✓ Treatment experience diary to record symptoms between appointments

Behavioral care

- ✓ Action planner
- ✓ Medication Planner
- ✓ Adherence question and monitoring over time to facilitate discussion

Emotional care

- ✓ Supports the HCP to tailor the discussion based on patient needs
- ✓ Provides a supportive and reassuring reference tool for HCP and patient

Cognitive care

- ✓ Simple, quick questions to assess patient beliefs about treatment and illness
- ✓ Quick reference guides to support HCP to address unhelpful beliefs



Outcomes

"I gave it to patients who I didn't think had got any problems...when they were filling the quiz in with me, some challenges [were] identified, which I found really useful"

PHYSICAL CARE

" There were a couple of [patients] where you thought, 'oh God, we've really not given them very much information at all'... people that had been on [DMARDs] for five, ten years, were saying, 'what's this DMARD thing that they keep talking about?'... So it was quite illuminating "

BEHAVIORAL CARE

" Very beneficial for patients who might forget to take the tablets "

EMOTIONAL CARE

" [Patients] talked about how useful it was, they didn't feel alone, they wished they had this book ages ago "

COGNITIVE CARE

" It makes you think about the kinds of things that you need to talk to your patient about... it is good for us all to have prompts on what we say to patients "



Summary

Therapeutic alliance plays a key role in patient self-management of chronic conditions. For patients, building and maintaining a good therapeutic alliance can ensure optimal self-management of their condition and treatment - along with improved health outcomes. Providing support solutions to HCPs that facilitate development of the therapeutic alliance, can help make their consultations more efficient and effective.

Find out more

Our White Papers demonstrate and explore how all stakeholders (patients, carers, health service providers, pharma) can meet the challenges of chronic disease management.

Further information on our self-management processes, products and technology solutions can be obtained by contacting Atlantis Healthcare.

Glossary

Adherence - An overarching term to describe the extent to which the patient's behavior matches agreed recommendations from the healthcare provider. Adherence emphasizes the role of the patient during the agreement phase and depends on the patient's ability to follow through with the treatment.

Intervention - Actions that are expected to bring about change in people.

Meta-analysis - The statistical procedure for combining data from multiple studies. When the treatment effect (or effect size) is consistent from one study to the next, meta-analysis can be used to identify this common effect. When the effect varies from one study to the next, meta-analysis may be used to identify the reason for the variation.

Self-efficacy - How confident a person is in their ability to perform a certain action and attain anticipated outcomes.

Shared decision making - A process in which clinicians and patients work together to make decisions. They also select tests, treatments and care plans based on clinical evidence that balances risks and expected outcomes with patient preferences and values.

Therapeutic alliance - Agreement on goals, actions required to achieve goals and the extent of the emotional bond between patient and healthcare professional.

How to get in touch with Atlantis Healthcare

Atlantis Healthcare is a recognized global leader in treatment adherence and patient self-management. We design, develop and deliver internationally scalable patient support solutions focused on improving an individual's quality of life. Our expertise in self-management, behavioral science and technology, enables us to deliver improved health outcomes and value-based care.

For more information on Atlantis Healthcare go to:



www.atlantishealthcare.com



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