

Self-management Support Perspectives from Two Sides

By Kathryn MacDonald, RD

This article will offer a few practical suggestions with respect to how clinicians can best support self-management when working with patients. It attempts to answer how clinicians can use their caring, training and compassion to connect with patients and help them deal with ongoing health conditions.

The perspectives discussed are that of a registered dietitian with experience working in the area of diabetes care and chronic disease self-management. The content is based on years of conversations with patients, family members and colleagues in both the clinical setting and community environment. These experiences have provided the greatest learning opportunities in terms of what works and what does not, including the elements required to build trusting relationships and supportive partnerships between clinician and patient.

Self-management refers to the tasks that an individual must undertake to live well with one or more chronic conditions.

Self-management support refers to provision of education and support by health-care professionals to increase patients' skills and confidence in managing their health conditions.¹

Clinician Perspective

Two key skills have proven particularly helpful in supporting patients and families to be the best self-managers they can be.²⁻⁴

First: Ask Questions Before Advising²

"Ask questions first" is easy to suggest but hard to practise at times, as our tendency is to deliver care and move into fixing situations for our patients. Learning to ask open-ended questions and actively listening before advising allow our patient's story to be told. This in turn helps us gauge a patient's level of motivation, the importance they place on taking care of themselves and their level of confidence in taking on self-management tasks. Hearing and appreciating a patient's story can allow us to tailor or match interventions more effectively to our patient's state of readiness to engage in elements of care.

Asking questions, listening carefully to the responses and reflecting back what one believes one has heard are some of the best skills clinicians can have in their toolbox to support self-management.

Ask . . .

"What is most important to you in our visit today?"

"What is getting in your way the most in terms of what you want or need to do?"

Once you have asked the questions, listened and reflected . . .



Ask ...

"I hear what you are saying ... tell me more."

Follow with ...

"How can I be of help?"

This approach communicates to the patient that the clinician is trying to understand and appreciate the patient's situation, which is the way to begin building the trusting relationship essential for supporting patients to become effective self-managers.

Second: Help Patients Set Goals and Devise Achievable Action Plans³⁻⁴

Education and skills training do not guarantee success in self-management. Helping patients devise realistic, attainable goals can increase the chances of success and empower patients to take care of themselves and feel confident in doing so.

Following your initial discussion (above), explore with patients if there is something they would like to do or feel they can do related to their health in the next week or two.

When a patient identifies something they would like to do, ask if they would like help putting together a plan of action. Mutual goal-setting and the development of an action plan driven by the patient help ensure the plan is individualized and meaningful. This is essential for sustaining a successful partnership that can help effectively tackle the overflowing plate of self-management


demands faced by patients with chronic health conditions.

Using the SMART-goal process (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, **T**ime-based), help your patient break their plan down into reasonable steps that answer the questions "what, when, where, how much and how often."

Using the SMART-goal process and having the patient construct the plan helps the patient become responsible for whether that plan includes the opportunity to identify any barriers that might hinder them, use problem-solving strategies and decide on next steps.

Important in the process is creating a plan for check-in on progress with the action plan. Check-in may be with the clinician, another team member, a family member or a friend. Through the check-in process, clinicians can help patients who are feeling overwhelmed by bolstering their confidence.





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When plans are only partially accomplished or not accomplished at all, it is important for the clinician, when possible, to help patients turn negative circumstances into positive ones. The clinician should both identify when a plan has been modified and celebrate successes, no matter how small or different from what was originally intended. The clinician should also make patients aware that an inability to follow through with a plan is not failure but rather an opportunity to learn, modify the plan, gather more resources and try again.

Patient Perspective

Patients experience a loss of control when, often unexpectedly, they are diagnosed with a chronic condition. They may feel guilt in having to put themselves first and overwhelmed by the challenge of securing time for an often long list of self-care tasks. Patients and caregivers may also be dealing with mental and physical fatigue, depending on how much the condition disrupts their lives.

Despite the demands, patients' efforts to self-manage may be demonstrated, sometimes in small steps that are difficult to recognize. Patients are often gathering information during and outside of their visits with health-care providers and seeking to learn new skills. Taking away learning after a visit, devising and working on a plan of action, identifying barriers to carrying out a plan, and problem solving related to barriers are all core skills for patients moving toward effective self-management.⁴⁻⁵

Conclusion

Patients seek to understand and be understood in order to take care of themselves. A clinician who helps implement a supportive self-management process that includes asking questions and active listening, as well as assisting with goal setting and action planning, goes a long way to helping patients maintain their commitment and confidence in their journey of self-management. 🏠

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Tips for Supporting Self-management

1. Be aware of and offer to connect patients to self-management support programs and groups in their community so they can build their network of support and resources to assist with goal setting, action planning and follow-through.⁴
2. As a clinician, seek training opportunities that support building your skills regarding effective communication and your role in supporting self-management.²⁻³
3. Be aware that the techniques discussed in this article work most of the time but are not appropriate for every patient. Some patients may not be ready to take action and require additional resources for support of care, while others may already be successfully self-managing without formal support.³

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