



Talking with Clients about their Medications

Medication Non-adherence



Office of Continuing Medical Education
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Talking with Clients about Medication

Medication non-adherence is a common cause for treatment failure. Supporting patients in continuing to take their medications can significantly improve treatment outcomes.

Getting Started

Take 5 minutes every few appointments to go over these topics with your patients.

- Ask how their medication is helpful.
- Acknowledge that taking a pill every day is a hassle.
- Acknowledge that everybody on medication misses taking it sometimes.
- Do not ask if they have missed any doses, rather ask, "How many doses have you missed?"
- Ask if they felt or acted different on days when they missed their medication.
- Was missing the medication related to any substance use relapse?
- Without judgment, ask "Why did you miss the medication? Did you forget, or did you choose not to take it at that time?"

For patients who forgot, ask them to consider the following strategies:

- Keep medication where it cannot be missed: with the TV remote control, near the refrigerator, or taped to the handle of a toothbrush. Everyone has 2 or 3 things they do every day without fail. Put the medication in a place where it cannot be avoided when doing that activity, but always away from children.
- Suggest they use an alarm clock set for the time of day they should take their medication. Reset the alarm as needed.
- Suggest they use a pill organizer: a small plastic box with places to keep medications for each day of the week, available at any pharmacy. The pill organizer acts as a reminder and helps track whether or not medications were taken.

For patients who admit to choosing NOT to take their medication:

- Acknowledge they have a right to choose NOT to use any medication.
- Stress that they owe it to themselves to make sure their decision is well thought out. It is an important decision about their personal health and they need to discuss it with their physician.
- Ask their reason for choosing not to take the medication.
- Don't accept "I just don't like pills." Tell them you are sure they wouldn't make such an important decision without having a reason.
- Offer as examples reasons others might choose not to take medication. For instance, they:
 - Don't believe they ever needed it
 - Don't believe they need it anymore; cured
 - Don't like the side effects
 - Fear the medication will harm them
 - Struggle with objections or ridicule of friends and family members.
 - Feel taking medication means they're not personally in control.

Transition to topics other than medications

Ask what they can do to stay healthy when they choose not to take the medication.

General Approach

The approach when talking with clients about medication is exactly the same as when talking about their substance abuse decisions.

- Explore the triggers or cues that led to the undesired behavior (either taking drugs of abuse or not taking prescribed medications).
- Review why the undesired behavior seemed like a good idea at the time.
- Review the actual outcome resulting from their choice.
- Ask if their choice got them what they were seeking.
- Strategize with clients about what they could do differently in the future.