

Communication Tools for Empowering Patient Autonomy

Patient autonomy is a part of the patient's bill of rights. Yet, it's an ideal that is often difficult to attain. A study, [*Patient Participation in Physical Therapy Goal Setting*](#), found that although physical therapists try to involve patients in goal setting, they often do not reach the full potential of patient participation. Fortunately, there are a variety of tools available to help physical therapists improve their clinical communication skills in order to enhance patient autonomy.

“Patient autonomy encourages patients to participate fully in their own care.”

To achieve patient autonomy, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) encourages physical therapists to understand the goals and objectives a patient hopes to achieve from physical therapy. Stacey Zeigler, PT, DPT, GCS and Professor at Clarkson University, recently had the opportunity to present "Empowering Patient Autonomy for Outstanding Outcomes" at the APTA Combined Sections Meetings held in New Orleans in February. She defines patient autonomy as empowering the patient enough to make their own decisions in the treatment process without being unnecessarily influenced by the health care provider.

Ziegler believes physical therapists need an open dialogue with patients to develop a true understanding of what they hope to achieve through physical therapy. Once physical therapists understand why patients sought out physical therapy and what they hope to accomplish, physical therapists will be in a better position to help physical therapists achieve their goals.

A Few Tools Available to Help Enhance Your Clinical Communication Skills

One clinical communication tool physical therapists can use to communicate effectively with their patients is the Ozer Payton Nelson Method (OPN). Using a structured communication format, the OPN method encourages open communication. The OPN Method invites physical therapists to engage patients through all phases of care by providing suggested questions to ask and guidelines on when questions should be asked.

“A number of clinical communication tools are available to enhance patient autonomy.”

Another communication method designed to improve patient autonomy is the Four Habits Model. This communication technique is built upon a teaching and research framework. It uses a sequence of important communication behaviors from both the physical therapist and patient perspective. The Four Habits include: Invest in the Beginning, Elicit the Patient’s Perspective, Demonstrate Empathy and Invest in the End. Elements within the Four Habits Model include everything from ways to build patient rapport quickly to developing empathy towards a patient’s emotions.

Sometimes it’s necessary to evaluate the patient’s view on autonomy. This is where the Ideal Patient Autonomy Scale comes into play. The Ideal Patient Autonomy Scale features 14-items that can be answered on a five-point scale. This communication tool helps physical therapists gain a better understanding of a patient’s perspective.

The Ottawa Personal Decision Guide is designed for any health-related decisions. The guide helps simplify the decision making process by allowing patients to list the benefits and risks with each option available. It’s a useful supplementary tool when more than one medically reasonable option is available to a patient.

These are just a few of the clinical communication tools available to help enhance patient participation in their physical therapy treatment. Learn more about some of the communication tools and decision aids Zeigler recommends by listening to the full podcast. Her APTA presentation is also available for download at PTTalker.com.

Learn more about improving your clinical communication skills by listening to a podcast with Stacey Zeigler, PT, DPT, GCS at PTTalker.com.



About the Author

After helping design and market the first preventative knee brace for football players as an Athletic Trainer at Iowa State University in the late 1970's, Jeff has made physical therapy equipment his passion since 1986. He launched Advantage Medical in 1994 with a commitment to help Physical Therapists and rehab professionals improve clinical outcomes as well as save time and costs through pioneering, creative solutions. Jeff's entrepreneurial approach keeps Advantage Medical and its clients at the forefront of innovations and best practices in the PT industry.

Jeff was also one of four original founders of the National Medical Alliance in 1988 which later changed its name to Motion1. He served as the Chief Operating Officer for 10 years and was instrumental in its growth and reputation as a leading supplier to independent rehabilitation distributors across the country. He is also the host of the long running podcast "PT Talker" featuring a physical therapy expert for listeners every week. Subscribe to the free, informative broadcast designed to help therapists grow their business at www.PTTalker.com

About Advantage Medical

Advantage Medical was established in 1994 to meet the growing needs of rehab professionals in a variety of medical disciplines. Advantage Medical has become a leading provider of expert advice as well as quality therapy equipment and supplies, offering innovative solutions to challenges faced by physical therapists, clinic directors, chiropractors, athlete trainers and other medical professionals.

In October of 2010, Advantage Medical joined the family of Scrip Companies of Bolingbrook, IL as an operating division. Now with access to a wider variety of products and large scale purchasing power, Advantage Medical is poised to raise the level of value we bring to our clients. Scrip Companies serves markets in massage therapy, chiropractic, spa and now physical therapy.

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