



The CAHPS Ambulatory Care Improvement Guide

Practical Strategies for Improving Patient Experience

Section 6: Strategies for Improving Patient Experience with Ambulatory Care

6.J. Support Groups and Self-Care

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6.J. SUPPORT GROUPS AND SELF-CARE

6.J.1. The Problem

Patients often express dissatisfaction because they are not getting everything they need from the clinicians—but in many cases, what they need is not something that the clinicians can provide. While many physicians believe that they can (or should be able to) satisfy all of their patients' needs, including the need for self-care, this presumption is not realistic or helpful for them or their patients—particularly for those with chronic conditions.

Many communities offer multiple resources that serve patients looking for support, advice, better self-care knowledge and skills, and comfort. Rather than setting expectations they cannot meet, clinicians need to accept that this is a role better filled by others and help their patients connect with the outside resources they need.

6.J.2. The Intervention

Health plans, medical groups, and physician practices can play two important roles to counter this problem. First, they can manage the expectations of members and patients by helping them regard their doctors as coaches rather than all-knowing sages. Second, they can offer access to the kinds of educational, behavioral, and emotional resources and support they need. Tactics for providing this support include self-care programs and support groups.

- **Self-Care Programs:** Self-care programs are usually highly structured educational forums where patients with a chronic condition may learn about a variety of topics, including symptom management, nutrition, community resources, medications, managing emotions, and communication skills.^{1,2} Self-care programs often teach skills that make people better able to manage their medical problems on their own, e.g., taking a blood pressure, giving injections, taking medications, and even performing diagnostic tests such as urine tests and blood glucose. Such programs are based on self-efficacy theory and emphasize problem solving, decision making, and confidence building.²
- **Support Groups:** Support groups may take the form of face-to-face meetings or on-line chat groups operating under the principle that patients can learn to take responsibility for the day-to-day management of their disease. They help people who have chronic health problems by teaching them how to do a better job of self-care, providing emotional support, or offering other kinds of concrete support, like getting groceries or providing transportation to and from medical appointments. Other similar group interventions include survivor groups, 12-step

¹ Lorig KR, Sobel DS, Stewart AL, et al. Evidence suggesting that a chronic disease self-management program can improve health status while reducing hospitalization: A randomized trial. *Med Care* 1999;37(1):5-14.

² Lorig KR, Sobel DS, Ritter PL, et al. Effect of a self-management program on patients with chronic disease. *Eff Clin Pract* 2001;4(6):256-62.

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programs, and psychoeducational groups for families of patients with chronic diseases.³

6.J.3. Benefits of These Interventions

The use of support groups and self-care programs can increase patients' knowledge about their disease and, in some cases, improve compliance with prescribed treatment. Additionally, these programs are beneficial to both patients and health facilities in that confident, knowledgeable patients practicing self-management have been shown to experience improved health status while utilizing fewer health care resources.^{1,4} Additional anecdotal evidence suggests that such programs can have a positive influence on long-term health outcomes.⁵

Studies of support groups formed for chronic arthritis, heart disease, stroke, and lung disease have shown that such groups have beneficial effects on mental and physical health as well as social functioning. Specifically, support groups were found to:^{1,5}

- Increase communication with physicians
- Improve self-reported health
- Make enhancements in social/role activities
- Reduce the need for hospitalizations

These studies did not detect short-term improvement in other factors such as pain and psychological well-being, but there is evidence of significant improvements of these factors over the long-term.

Inexpensive self-care programs and support groups appear to be responsible for significant cost savings. Evaluations of some of these programs have shown fewer hospitalizations and days spent in the hospital as patients become more confident in caring for themselves. Additionally, one study found a total health savings of ten times the cost of the self-care program.^{1,5}

6.J.4. Implementation of These Interventions

Trained lay persons can effectively moderate support groups and educate patients in self-care techniques; this person need not have the same condition as the patients. Such instructors have been found to be acceptable to both patients and health professionals and are an inexpensive staffing option for these programs.¹

³ Mechanic D. Issues in promoting health. *Soc Sci Med* 1999;48(6):711-8.

⁴ Bodenheimer T, Lorig K, Holman H, et al. Patient self-management of chronic disease in primary care. *JAMA* 2002;288(19):2469-75.

⁵ Lorig KR, Mazonson PD, Holman HR. Evidence suggesting that health education for self-management in patients with chronic arthritis has sustained health benefits while reducing health care costs. *Arthritis Rheum* 1993;36(4):439-46.

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Additionally, many guidebooks are available that can serve as a text for self-care programs or as a topical guide for support group meetings. The book *Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions* (see the box below for the full citation) has served these purposes for a variety of self-care programs.

Participants typically learn about self-care programs and support groups through referrals, fliers left in physicians' offices, and/or program announcements posted at senior citizen centers and in patient or member newsletters and Web sites. Additional cost savings could come from holding these meetings at the health care facility (if sufficient room is available) or at low-cost sites in the community, such as churches, senior centers, or public libraries.

Resources on Support Groups and Self-Care

Lorig K, Halsted H, Sobel D. *Living a healthy life with chronic conditions: Self-management of heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, depression, asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, and other physical and mental health conditions*. 4th ed. Boulder: Bull Publishing Company; 2012.

New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse, Dover, NJ 1-800-367-6274

<http://www.njgroups.org/>