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Importance of Establishing Expectations in Physical Therapy World During Evaluation with Patients

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ABSTRACT

Physical therapists play a crucial role as frontline professionals managing orthopedic pathologies resulting from chronic or acute injuries. Despite undergoing extensive education, including six to seven years of professional training and passing national and state examinations, therapists often lack formal training in patient communication. This gap in education is typically addressed only through practical experience. As the field of physical therapy has evolved due to regulatory and insurance reimbursement changes, effective communication during patient evaluations has become increasingly vital. Establishing clear expectations, understanding patient's emotions and social styles, and building trust through reliability, credibility, and intimacy are essential. Failure to accurately communicate or follow up can lead to recurring symptoms, increased reliance on medications or surgeries, and undue stress and financial hardship for patients. By improving communication skills and understanding different social styles, therapists can enhance patient education, trust, and overall treatment outcomes.

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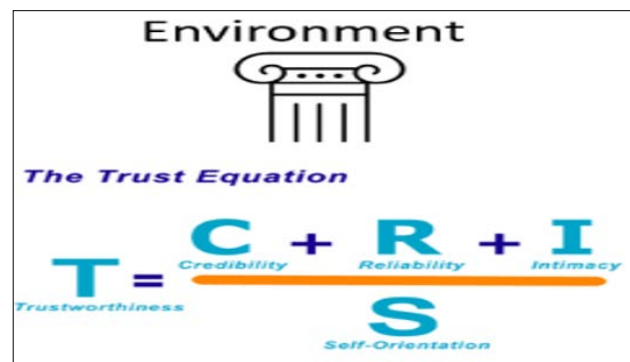
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Introduction

Physical therapists work as the frontline for most orthopedic pathologies arising from chronic or acute injuries [1-7]. To become a physical therapist, one must undergo nearly six to seven years of professional education, pass the national physical therapist examination, and meet other state requirements [8]. However, this education often lacks training in basic communication with patients [3]. Therapists usually gain these skills after they start their professional life and begin working in the field [5]. The physical therapy field has evolved significantly since the early 2000s due to changes in regulations and insurance reimbursement policies [4]. During an evaluation, physical therapists typically correlate symptoms with clinical presentations and imaging provided in medical records [1]. Physical therapy treatments address symptoms to alleviate pain and promote healing [2]. These treatments and physiological changes take time and require persistent efforts as medically necessary [7]. If the plan of care is not accurate or optimally followed, it can lead to short-term effects or none, causing symptoms and pain to return [6]. This situation can necessitate restarting the whole process, relying on medications, or prematurely opting for surgical options, leading to undue stress on the patient, decreased quality of life, and financial hardship for the patient and the overall healthcare system [4]. This can be avoided with proper education and communication skills to improve patient education [8]. Patients need to be educated on the conditions they might be facing, potential treatment effects, treatment duration, short-term effects, and long-term effects [5].



Building Trust Equation

Understanding the patient's emotions, pain, and mindset is important during an evaluation, as each patient can react differently to the treatment session and may demonstrate different emotions and responses, understanding of the concepts [1]. Building trust is a combination of building reliability, credibility, and intimacy and reducing self-orientation, which counteracts [2].

Reliability, Credibility and Intimacy

These three factors run hand in hand. As a therapist, it is important for the patient to know that the information provided is accurate [7]. Reliability is a feeling for the patient to know that the information provided by the therapist is accurate; credibility is a feeling that the patient knows that the therapist cares about them

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and will do things in a timely fashion; and building intimacy is more about the therapist's ability to be vulnerable to things they might not be comfortable about but still do it to provide the best service possible, with the patient knowing that the intent behind the actions involves a patient care-first approach [6].

Case Example

A patient asks a therapist if they will owe any money for every session of therapy since they think they have good insurance. Assuming the therapist was not aware of the insurance, but the therapist informs the patient that they do not think they will owe anything, the patient receives a bill for \$100.00 for three sessions of therapy they have taken. In this situation, the therapist has lost credibility as the information provided turned out to be false [1]. Talking about the same example, the therapist could have said, "I am not sure, but I can check and call you by this evening." Here, the therapist and patient build a bond as the therapist puts themselves in a vulnerable position of not knowing the answer but is brave enough to admit they are not aware but willing to find out and get back with the answer. Assuming the therapist gets back with the patient before the given timeline, the therapist has successfully built a sense of trust by being reliable for giving the right information, credible for following up on time, and a sense of intimacy by being vulnerable to a situation where they were honest about not knowing something [2]. In another situation, if the therapist was not able to find the answer to the insurance question due to insurance verification not being completed in time, the right thing for the therapist to do is to call the patient and inform them that their question is still on their mind and is still waiting on insurance verification and will get back to them as soon as they get it. If the therapist forgets to do this, they might lose credibility with the patient and might lose some trustworthiness [7].

It is important for the therapist to identify the patient's social style to have effective communication strategies [4]. Understanding these social styles is important for building confidence and trust in the patient [5]. These social styles include drivers, amiable, expressors, and analytical [8]. Each social style demonstrates unique interaction qualities, which have the potential to create the best connection and environment for the patient to build trust [6]. When people, not just patients, find resemblance with the people they are dealing with, they tend to trust them much faster and develop a sense of reliability and intimacy [1].

Self-Orientation

High self-orientation can lead to a lack of trust as this can portray someone looking for their own interests rather than their patient's interests [7]. Classic signs of high self-orientation can be a lack of empathy, selfishness, insincerity with work, or lack of thoroughness or attention to the patient [4]. Low self-orientation helps to build trust [2].

Social Styles

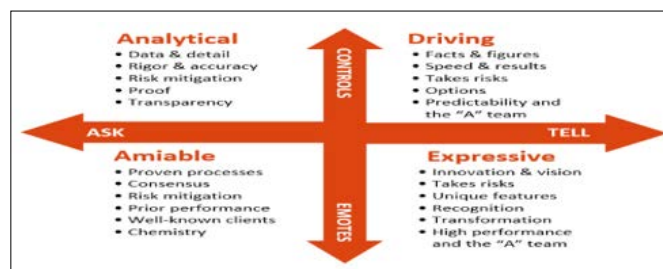
Drivers: These are the easiest patients to deal with and predicting

their mental status is easy. They want quick results and will do everything in their power to follow what you say if it gives them quick results. They are risk-takers, and if they trust your judgments, they will go by the book. Losing credibility with them can be easy if they don't see the results or progress that you might have predicted [6].

Analytical: These patients are extremely detail oriented. They are interested in treatments backed by data and analysis, e.g., best practices. There is a good chance that these patients might have already researched some information on the condition they are coming in to be treated and some of the treatment options. The therapist does not need to agree with what they are saying. They can give them the best treatment options as deemed necessary and must be accurate and explain the 'why' behind everything [1]. These patients would not hesitate to cross-check the claims or options provided by the therapist. Being accurate is important to maintain credibility [2].

Expressive: These patients thrive on innovation and are usually risk-takers. They are very high performers and wear their expression on their face and body language. Therapists need to match a patient's level of energy and excitement during therapy sessions [7]. If a patient feels that there is a high level of excitement and innovation involved with the services and can socially interact, they will trust the process [4].

Amiable: It is extremely important to build trust with these patients. Once you build trust with them, they will do what the therapist wants them to do. They also go by word of mouth or what they might have heard from someone else's previous experiences; this might be someone they already trust [5]. For example, an amiable patient might ask a therapist about ultrasound treatment just because they have probably heard it from their son who got ultrasound treatment for his issues previously and felt better. But while framing the question, they might not mention it and might only ask if ultrasound can be used [8]. Asking open-ended questions helps them to get deeper into their thought process and know what trust factors they rely on [6]. These patients also do not want to hurt anyone's feelings and may not say 'no' or resist something they do not believe or trust in, but may just withdraw themselves from the situation without any notice [1]. In business, these are the patients who surprise the therapist the most because subjectively they all say they felt better but suddenly stopped therapy services without completing their plan of care [7].



Art of Storytelling

The art of storytelling is important to ensure the therapist can communicate the value of physical therapy effectively [2]. It is important for the therapist to show empathy and address the patient's problems unique to their case [5]. It is crucial to understand how the patient might be feeling and what they might want while performing the evaluation [4]. Ignoring or not actively listening is one of the major mistakes made by clinicians, which can lead to patient dissatisfaction and loss of trust [1]. After identifying the social style, storytelling can be linked to personal experience or a past patient experience, and sharing real-life experiences can enhance predicted outcomes [7]. Being careful not to give away any HIPAA-protected information is crucial while sharing real-life experiences [8]. Begin the story by describing the outcome achieved and then build up the story on how it was achieved to engage the patient throughout the conversation [6].

Therapist's Learning Curve to Master the Art of Communication During the Evaluation

All therapists usually share a similar learning curve but might have some uniqueness depending on their experience in the field, their future goals, and their intelligence quotient and emotional quotient [3]. This is a continuous cycle consisting of collaboration with the team/mentor, formal learning experiences, and experience gained from day-to-day job scenarios [1]. Mentors need to direct their thought process or messaging by understanding the future endeavors of the therapist [5]. For example, while talking to a therapist who wants to grow as a clinician, the importance of a successful evaluation can be explained by linking it to patient care. How following a plan of care can reduce the patient's issues earlier than taking longer if it isn't followed [4]. This can be linked more to numbers for someone with a more business mindset who wants to grow into management [7]. For example, this can be linked to how successful evaluations can lead to reduced cancellation rates, better patient retention, and higher revenue [2].



Conclusion

Establishing clear expectations during evaluations in physical therapy is crucial for enhancing trust and ensuring effective patient care to the most optimal level possible [1]. Given the evolving dynamics of physical therapy, with regulatory changes and insurance policy reimbursement changes, clear communication can significantly impact treatment outcomes [4]. By integrating effective communication skills, understanding patients' social styles, and maintaining a low self-orientation, therapists can build trust, enhance treatment adherence, and improve overall patient satisfaction [2]. The art of storytelling plays a vital role in

connecting with patients and illustrating the value of therapy in relatable terms [7]. Continuous learning and adaptation, driven by collaboration with mentors and experience, are essential for therapists to master these skills and provide optimal care [3]. Future studies should explore incorporating these communication strategies into the syllabus for physical therapy schools and compare their effectiveness on overall healthcare costs [5].

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