



Key strategies to enhance
**patient
engagement**

Table of contents

- 03 Patient engagement and personalized care**
- 04 Barriers to optimal engagement**
- 04 Strategies to enhance engagement**
 - 06** Improving health literacy
 - 07** Facilitating effective communication
 - 08** Increasing motivation
 - 09** Reducing overwhelm
- 10 Identifying patient engagement levels**
- 11 Prioritizing patient engagement**
- 12 References**



Patient engagement and personalized care

Over the past decade, prioritizing patient engagement has moved out of the shadows of healthcare and into the forefront. It has become clear that engaging patients as active participants in their treatment plans is critical as it can significantly improve clinical outcomes, enhance the patient experience, encourage treatment [adherence](#) and self-management, and reduce overall healthcare costs. ⁽¹⁾

“Patient engagement begins with the establishment of a strong partnership between patient and provider,” explains naturopathic oncologist Tina Kaczor, ND, FABNO. “Authentic collaboration demonstrates to the patient that we are in this together and they have my support throughout their entire health journey.”

According to a 2018 systematic review, patients felt that their involvement in health-related decision making was important, but they felt less empowered if they viewed their involvement as only tokenistic on the part of the provider, especially if their requests were not addressed or care decisions were made without their input. ⁽³⁾

Establishing an effective strategy to fully engage patients can be challenging because of the broad spectrum of commitment levels that exist among patients. Most experts agree that encouraging patient engagement requires a level of personalized care that meets each patient where they are along that spectrum and customizes accordingly.

“One of the most important aspects of healthcare for me is engaging with each patient on a personal level and really listening during that first encounter,” says chiropractic clinician Ramneek Bhogal, DC, DABCI. “I also feel it’s important to genuinely recognize the patient’s burden of suffering to whatever degree that may be.”

There is no doubt that the involvement of the healthcare provider is essential to patient engagement. Creating a personalized patient engagement plan first requires the provider to understand potential barriers that can affect active engagement.

Barriers to optimal engagement

There are many potential [barriers](#) to patient engagement from both the patient and provider perspective, including:

- Confusing or unclear communication
- Cultural language barriers
- Financial restrictions
- High provider/clinic workload
- Lack of community-based services and health resources
- Lack of health improvement or positive results
- Lack of patient motivation, willingness, or trust
- Low levels of health literacy
- Low priority for the provider ⁽⁵⁾

Let's take a look at some effective strategies to address barriers and improve patient engagement in clinical practice.

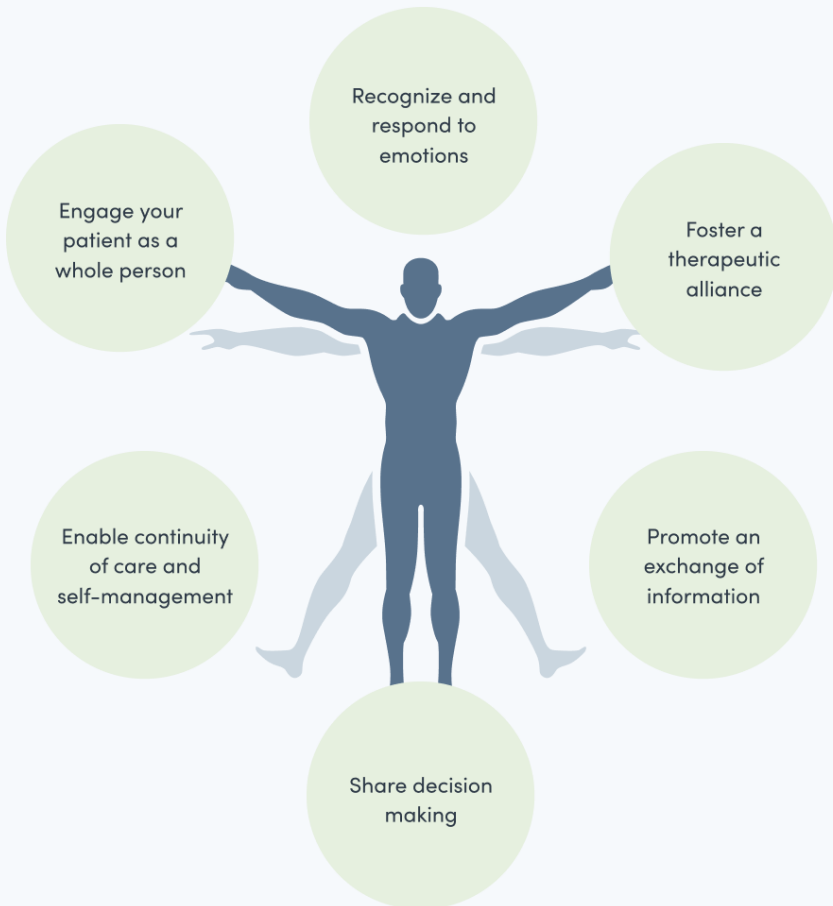
Strategies to enhance engagement

Integrative health pioneer Dr. Ronald Hoffman, MD offers this advice to clinicians when it comes to enhancing patient engagement: "Work hard to provide real value at each patient encounter. Listen, show empathy, be sincere, and be generous with your time." He also believes that low levels of health literacy can be one of the biggest barriers to patient engagement and treatment [adherence](#). Low health literacy can also contribute to a patient feeling overwhelmed.





6 elements of patient-centered care



Improving health literacy

“My practice model involves a lot of patient education because patients are grateful when you take the time to explain and educate them about basic concepts in medicine, nutrition, and lifestyle. Patients do better and enjoy more sustained benefits when they understand the rationale for treatment rather than simply complying by rote,” says Dr. Hoffman who has also been a radio broadcaster and podcast host for more than 30 years. This is where enhancing health literacy comes into play.

Health literacy is defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information needed to make appropriate health decisions.”⁽¹²⁾ Health and medicine can be complex and even highly educated patients can struggle with health literacy.

The greatest disparities in health literacy are seen with ethnic minorities, elderly individuals, individuals with lower education levels, and those living in poverty.⁽¹²⁾ Taking special care with these patient groups is important when it comes to improving health literacy and accessibility to care. A patient with low health literacy does not fully comprehend the information needed to make health decisions and may become frustrated and noncompliant, which will negatively impact health outcomes. Conversely, improving health literacy supports patient empowerment, positive behavioral change, and treatment adherence.^(2,7)

If low health literacy is suspected, here are a few tips to ensure a patient is understanding

the recommendations included in their wellness plan:

- Address language barriers by using interpreters or having bilingual staff.
- Ask the patient to repeat the information provided in their own words to determine their level of understanding.
- Ask open-ended questions to ensure that the patient understands the recommendation(s). For example, ask “What questions do you have?” instead of “Do you have any questions?”.
- Encourage questions and be open to patient feedback.
- In some cases, having handouts with graphics and pictures instead of long written instructions may be helpful.
- Provide written information at a lower grade level (6th grade or lower).
- Speak slowly and clearly, but do not patronize the patient.⁽⁴⁾

Dr. Kaczor also uses analogies, perspectives, and words that make sense to each patient depending on how they see the world. “I may talk statistics with a professor or use color analogies with an artist,” she says.

“Doctor as teacher really applies when it comes to improving health literacy and patient adherence,” explains integrative mental health expert Dr. Peter Bongiorno, ND. “For example, a patient with anxiety may not realize that food sensitivities can contribute to neuroinflammation, which can increase anxiety. So before I recommend that they stop eating certain foods, I will clearly explain this connection.”

This concept of “doctor as teacher” is one that integrative practitioners easily embrace. Patients

are often more receptive to being taught versus being dictated to. This approach creates more of a partnership between patient and practitioner because the patient is an active participant in learning more about their care.

"I have a large whiteboard with colored markers in my office," says Dr. Bhogal who has a private practice in Metamora, MI. "When I use that whiteboard, I am definitely in teacher mode, and my patients affectionately call this 'school time.'"

Facilitating effective communication

One of the most effective tools integrative practitioners have to enhance engagement is the way in which they communicate with patients. As with all forms of communication, the goal is to minimize misunderstandings, and this is accomplished by simplifying language and confirming patient comprehension. ⁽⁴⁾

Whether written or verbal, print or electronic, to deliver an easily understood message means choosing words wisely. Use non-medical language whenever possible. Here are some examples:

- "Belly" instead of "abdomen"
- "Cancer-causing" instead of "carcinogenic"
- "Fats" instead of "lipids"
- "Get rid" of instead of "eradicate"
- "Harmful" instead of "adverse"
- "Plan" instead of "protocol"
- "Preventative" instead of "prophylactic"
- "Topical" instead of "local"

Try not to use vague or subjective language. Instead of saying "feel better," specifically describe how the patient will feel and how much better. For example, "your stomach pain should be less painful by 50% within the next 24 hours."

When possible, it's also best to prioritize the information and limit the conversation to three to five key talking points. Repeat those talking points to ensure the most important aspects of the protocol are understood. ⁽⁴⁾

As with any interaction, making eye contact and listening carefully is key to effective communication. "I have learned in my practice that it is not always the testing and protocols you use for a patient that creates effective patient engagement," says Dr. Bongiorno who has two clinics in New York, "it's having the patient feel heard and cared for that makes the greatest difference."

Communicating with patients also needs to happen outside of the clinic visit. Following up with a patient after a visit provides an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, answer any questions that may have come up, track progress, and make treatment adjustments as needed. ⁽⁴⁾

Encouraging active patient participation is also a great way to enhance engagement and stimulate positive patient-provider communication on an ongoing basis. "One way I stay connected to my patients between visits is to ask them to keep track of certain aspects of their health," says Dr. Kaczor, who is the creator of Round Table Cancer Care. "I want them to keep a food journal or document

symptoms they experience each day, which provides us with important discussion points during our next visit.” Asking the patient to take an active role in their care plan is also a great way to keep them motivated.

Increasing motivation

How a provider communicates can help motivate patients. “I constantly reaffirm with my patients what they are already doing well,” says Dr. Kaczor who is also the Editor-in-Chief of the peer-reviewed *Natural Medicine Journal*. “From there, I help them build new practices to optimize their health. I also remind them that laughter, joy, movement, socialization, and good food are all powerful medicines.”

“The unmotivated patient is certainly a challenge, but just by coming through the doors of my clinic, that patient desires some degree of change,” says Dr. Bhogal. “I talk to this patient about the next small step, and I keep the goal achievable to give this patient the momentum needed to create change and set them up for success.” Most doctors agree that nothing is more motivating than having the patient feel better.

An unmotivated patient will typically look at changing health behavior through one or more of these three lenses:

1. They do not easily embrace the reasons they need to change.
2. They feel that change is too hard.
3. They believe the benefits of change do not outweigh the efforts of change. ⁽⁶⁾

One way to transform these beliefs is through motivational interviewing, a strategy that helps the practitioner explore and resolve a patient’s ambivalence. Motivational interviewing is a counseling style that was originally used to treat addiction, and it is most effective for resistant individuals compared to highly motivated patients. ⁽⁸⁾

When used in the clinical setting, research shows that motivational interviewing is more effective than traditional advice to help motivate patients who have a broad range of health conditions. ⁽⁹⁾

The table below shows how the traditional advice approach differs from the motivational interviewing approach. ⁽¹¹⁾

Traditional advice	Motivational interviewing
Emphasizes the sickness aspect of the health condition	Emphasizes how to improve personal choices associated with the health condition
Focuses on convincing the patient that there is an issue	Focuses on eliciting the patient’s concerns about the issue
Focuses on correcting the patient’s perceptions	Focuses on exploring the patient’s perceptions
If the patient displays denial, it is met with argumentation	If the patient displays denial, it is met with reflection

Reducing overwhelm

Another way to help motivate patients is to transform their feelings of overwhelm into feelings of empowerment. When a patient is overwhelmed with their health condition and the potential burden of their care, there is an increased risk of nonadherence and lack of engagement. ⁽¹⁰⁾

“When I first started in clinical practice, I made the mistake of throwing everything at the problem that I could, which caused the patient to feel overwhelmed,” says Dr. Bhogal. Dr. Bhogal quickly learned to adapt his strategy to include the following steps:

- He uses the initial interview and history to not only help the patient understand their condition but also begin prioritizing their care.
- He provides dietary and lifestyle advice to identify easy tasks that can make an impact without overwhelming the patient.
- He creates a long-term goal with benchmarks so the patient can see an end in sight.

He also works hard to create a solid partnership with his patients. “When the patient feels that they are a part of a team effort, they are less inclined to feel overwhelmed,” says Dr. Bhogal.

Dr. Kaczor also focuses on partnership and prioritization to reduce feelings of overload. “I give my patients a lot of information about the dietary supplements I recommend, and I also prioritize them,” says Dr. Kaczor. “With prioritization, if they can’t take them all because of the cost, pill fatigue, or some other reason, there is a hierarchy of sorts that helps me cull the list to help reduce the patient’s feelings of overwhelm.”

While certain unmotivated or overwhelmed patients can be easy to identify, figuring out where the engagement gaps exist in other patients may not be as obvious. That’s when the following tool may be useful.



Identifying patient engagement levels

To help identify patient engagement levels, it may be useful to use characteristics of the perfectly engaged patient as your guide. This will also help highlight areas where the individual may need more support to become a more engaged patient.

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being not true and 5 being very true), rate the following characteristics of your patient:

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Asks questions about their health and their health plan | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Actively engages in the patient portal and utilizes other resources provided | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Consistently and accurately repeats back recommendations given | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Fully understands their health condition | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Proactively follows the treatment plan provided | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Does not appear overwhelmed by their condition or their health plan | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Highly motivated to make the necessary changes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Participates in the shared decision-making process | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Has their own health goals based on what's important to them | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Keeps track of symptoms and other issues to discuss with their provider | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |



If your patient scores all 4s and 5s, congratulations you have an engaged patient! Scores for certain questions will help identify gaps that need some attention. For example:

- A high score for Question 1 indicates that the patient would likely appreciate as much education and communication as possible.
- Low scores for Questions 2 to 4 indicate that you may want to work on health literacy with that patient.
- Low scores for Questions 5 to 7 indicate that you may want to consider employing motivational interviewing techniques with that patient.

- Low scores for Questions 5 and 6 may indicate that your patient is overwhelmed and prioritizing their care plan may be a good engagement strategy.

A number of tools and questionnaires are available to determine engagement such as the Patient Activation Measurement (PAM), which is a validated tool to help determine a patient's confidence, knowledge, and skills in managing their wellness. Others include the Patient Perceptions of Empowerment Scale (PPES), Health Education Impact Questionnaire (HeiQ), and Health Care Empowerment (HCE).

Prioritizing patient engagement

By focusing on the strategies in this guide, you will be providing patient-centered care that encourages the highest level of patient engagement. These strategies include improving health literacy, enhancing communication, and encouraging motivation. By prioritizing patient engagement, integrative practitioners can improve patient outcomes and the overall patient experience. Chances are, it will also be a more fulfilling experience for the practitioner.



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