

SELF-MANAGEMENT: Giving Veteran Patients Tools to Take Control of Their Own Health

A Resource for Health Care Providers

Introduction

Many patients often have chronic conditions or symptoms. Management of patient's symptoms and emotions that result from chronic conditions is important in helping to maintain their physical and emotional health. Empowering patients to become active self-managers can help them live better lives.

This fact sheet for providers describes an important aspect of treating patients with chronic symptoms called self-management and how providers can better partner with Veteran patients to foster self-management. This fact sheet also describes the importance of self-management for patients with Medically Unexplained Symptoms (MUS), or symptoms without a medical diagnosis, as these are often difficult to deal with for patients and providers.

What is Self-Management?

Self-management is a broad concept, important to understand in context of what it means for patients and doctors. Self-management includes a range of behaviors patients can adopt to improve their quality of life. Self-management helps patients maintain or even improve their function. There are many different self-management behaviors. Some specific self-management behaviors are eating healthy, exercising and practicing exercises to manage stress. Some, such as exercise, are beneficial to patients with any chronic condition or symptom while others are condition specific (for example taking measures to control glucose for diabetes).

Self-management should be part of the patients overall treatment plan- the part of the plan that calls for patients to be actively involved in managing their own health. In addition to recommending further testing or medications, providers can work with patients to help them understand treatments and what they can do themselves to improve their health and live better with their health problems.

Why Self-Management?

Patients' ability to self-manage is important to VA doctors because several studies indicate that it is related to outcomes of care. Self management empowers the

patient to learn new skills to manage illness and the patient feels more in control. It increases patients' self-efficacy or confidence to change behavior and/or cope with symptoms on their own (Lorig et al, 1999). It also improves clinical outcomes and symptoms and helps patients to maintain and often improve function and quality of life (QoL) (Bodenheimer et al, 2002; Lorig et al, 2001). Self-management promotes a patient centered care environment and facilitates communication and the patient/provider relationship. It improves visit satisfaction as patients feel listened to and partnered with and the provider feels a greater sense of accomplishment, and that they've done a better job caring for the patient. In general, self-management helps to create a high quality care environment.

Self-Management and Chronic Illness

Self-management has been shown to be effective in maintaining/improving health outcomes for patients living with chronic disease. One example of a well-researched self-management program for patients living with a chronic condition is the Chronic Disease Self Management Program (CDSMP) developed by Lorig and her colleagues at Stanford University. The program is a workshop given two and a half hours, once a week, for six weeks. Patients with different chronic health conditions

attend together. A variety of topics are covered, including techniques to deal with problems such as pain, fatigue and frustration. This program was evaluated and shown to be effective for various health conditions, with significant improvements in health outcomes. Many of the positive results of the program persisted for as long as three years (Lorig et al, 2001). The Lorig program is offered in both the NY VA health care system and the NJ VA health care system, and several other VA health care systems across the country and patients can be referred to take the course. Visit this site for more information on locations of course offerings: <http://patienteducation.stanford.edu/organ/cdsites.html#NJ>.

Medically Unexplained Symptoms (MUS)

Medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) is a term sometimes used in health care to describe a situation where an individual suffers from multiple physical symptoms for which the physician or other health care provider has found no physical cause. Dealing with a “diagnosis” of MUS is difficult for patients and providers since the cause of symptoms is not known. Regardless of not knowing the cause of a symptom, often treatment for symptoms remains the same and self-management is the key to improved life quality.

Self-Management and MUS

Evaluation and management of MUS is based largely on how the patient feels. A compassionate approach to patients with medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) is essential. The Veterans Administration (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) have developed clinical practice guidelines to assist primary care clinicians in the evaluation and management of patients with deployment-related health concerns and MUS. The clinical practice guideline for MUS calls for providers to deliver self-management education in an empathetic manner and to empower the patient. It promotes the BATHE technique as one way to do so.

The BATHE Technique provides a time efficient way to address impact of patients’ symptoms on their level of function- it helps target in an empathetic way what could be most important to patients in terms of self-management. It probes the patient to talk about what current life issues are, what troubles them most about these issues, what might help these issues and most

importantly helps the provider to demonstrate empathy to the patient. Empathy is especially important since the perceived risk is high for patients with MUS (due to uncertainty of the cause of their symptom and what course it will take).

MUS are in essence chronic symptoms. Maintaining and improving function for MUS patients is important. Patients should understand that even though there is no cure and symptoms may remain unexplained, they can “live better” by becoming more active self-managers

Conclusions

Chronic conditions and symptoms, including MUS, create a challenging situation for you and your patients. You can help by teaching your patients to self-manage and by offering guidance, resources and support in long term management that can help improve symptoms, including pain and fatigue. Effective self-management support means more than telling your patients what to do next. It means acknowledging that your patients have a central role in their care. It includes the use of proven programs that provide basic information, emotional support, and strategies for living with chronic symptoms. Using a collaborative approach, you and your patients can work together to define problems, set priorities, establish goals, create treatment plans and solve problems along the way.

*The information contained in this sheet was obtained in part from the following sources. It was developed by a group of health care providers with special concern about deployment-related health concerns.

References:

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