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# Therapeutic Assignments: Structured Framework for Interaction Between Medical Students and Patients on Psychiatry Clerkships

Yael Dvir, M.D., Isheeta Zalpuri M.D.

## INTRODUCTION

- Medical students enjoy high level of patient contact on psychiatric clerkships. (1)
- They have felt that forming a relationship with a patient can have therapeutic effects by imparting hope, decreasing their isolation and providing individualized attention. (2)
- However students have encountered difficulties forming alliance with their patients, either due to acuity of illness such as psychosis or due to character pathology, addiction etc.
- They need to feel comfortable dealing with more difficult situations such as extremes of emotion or breaks with reality (3).
- Interviewing skills must be continually developed (4,5).
- We hope that Therapeutic Assignments (TA) will:
  - Provide a medium for students to improve their interviewing skills.
  - Enhance their comfort around communicating with patients about sensitive topics.
  - Form a therapeutic alliance with their patients, which will support the growth of empathy and be an important aspect in the patient's treatment.

## METHODS

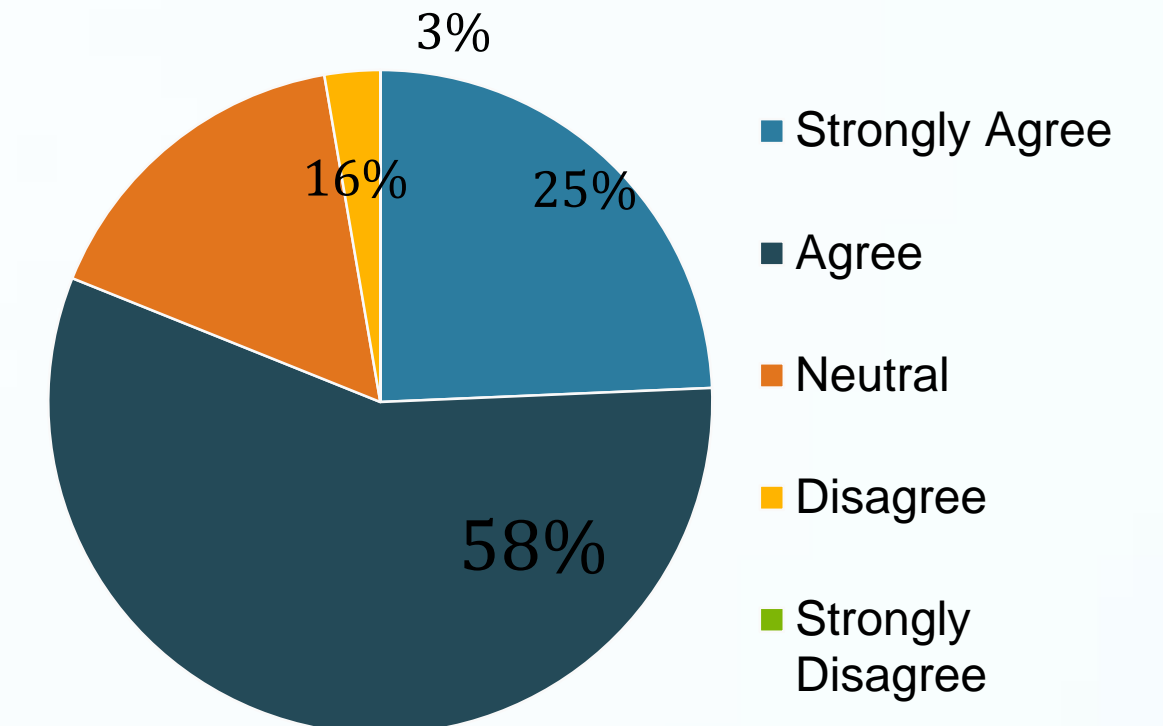
- Therapeutic Assignments were originally developed by Dr. Donald Fidler
- **Scripted encounters** focusing on specific challenges and life events
  - Identify an appropriate TA for a patient they follow.
  - Provide TA to the patient to review and prepare.
  - The following day, the students will review the questions and answers with the patient.
  - If relevant information is obtained, the students will share it with the team and may process the encounter with their preceptor.
  - Students are encouraged to discuss any relevant information obtained with their team, however they are not required to document their entire interaction with the patient.
  - Complete a survey at the end of the clerkship.

## RESULTS

- 46 students participated in TA and responded to the survey:
- 90% students agreed or strongly agreed that TA helped them better understand their patient.
  - 83% agreed or strongly agreed that TA contributed to their comfort level in talking to patients about sensitive issues.
  - 83% believed that TA were helpful to their patients.



Contributed to my comfort level in communicating with patients about sensitive issues

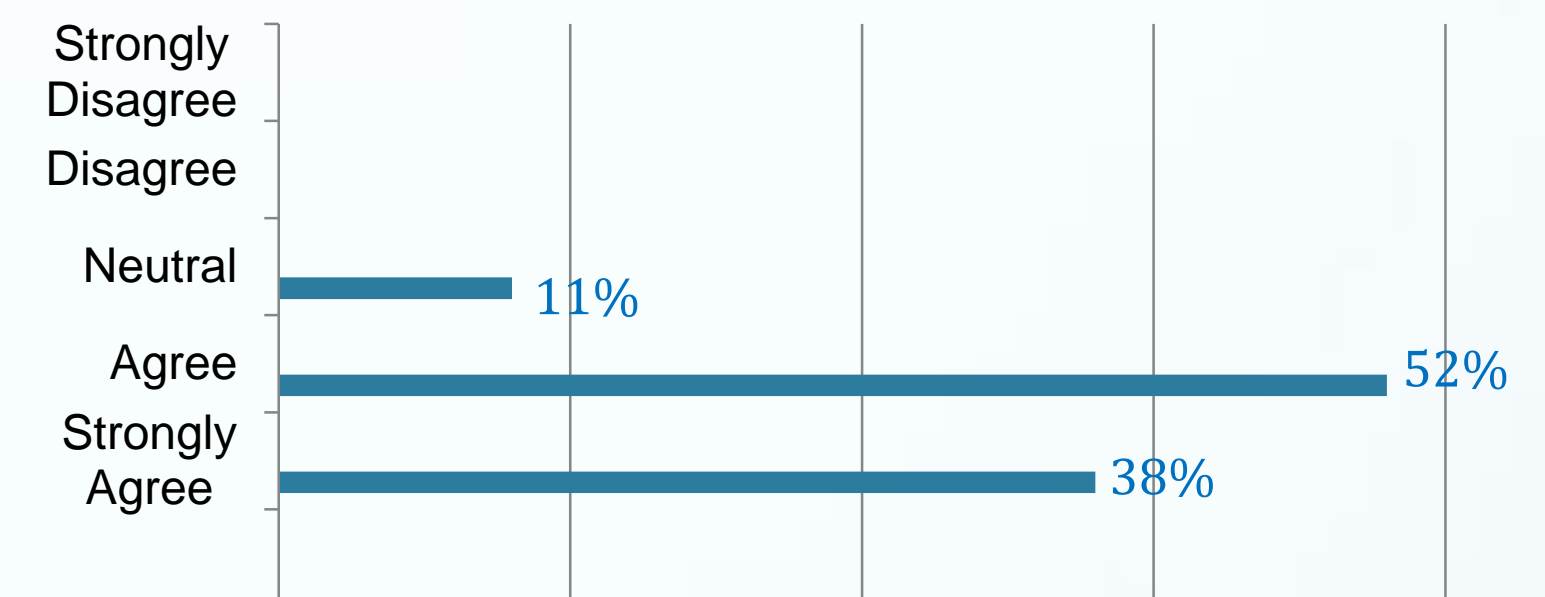


*"...extremely helpful in expanding my psychiatric interviewing skills... tremendously beneficial in obtaining a very detailed social history...each question gave me a small vignette into an aspect of the patient's life or illness and provided a springboard to continue to expand on the patient's social history... Provide(d) the foundation for beginning to build the therapeutic relationship."*

*-spontaneous student reflection*



Helped me better understand where my patient is coming from



## CONCLUSIONS

- TA provides a structured framework for student-patient interactions :
  - to improve students' comfort in discussing sensitive materials with patients
  - to enhance their experience on psychiatric clerkships
- Students have found that doing assignments was helpful to their patients.
- While using TA, students do not need to worry about arriving at diagnosis or the next questions .
- TA is a unique opportunity as a self-reflection exercise for the patient and contributes to time efficient teaching .

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