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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

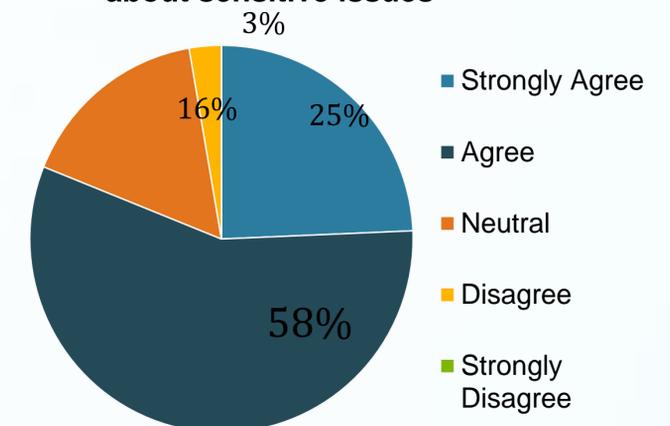
- Therapeutic Assignments were originally developed by Dr. Donald Fidler
- **Scripted encounters** focusing on specific challenges and life events
 - Identify an appropriate TA for a patient they follow.
 - Provide TA to the patient to review and prepare.
 - The following day, the students will review 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

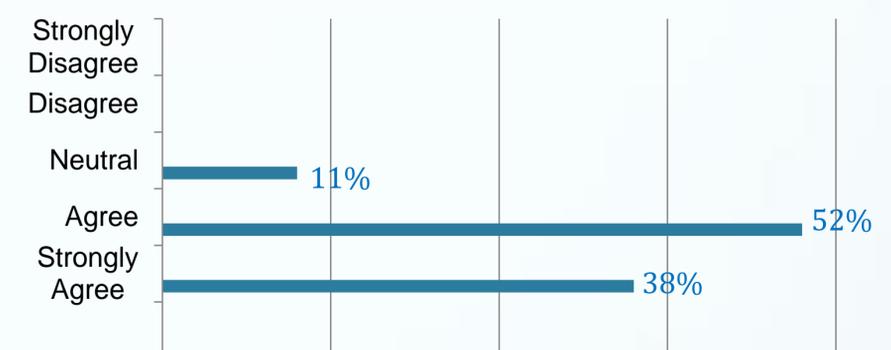


"...extremely helpful in expanding my psychiatric interviewing skills... tremendously beneficial in obtaining a very detailed social history...each question gave me a small vignette into an aspect of the patient's life or illness and provided a springboard to continue to expand on the patient's social 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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