

PMSIG Clinical Pearl August 2017  
The Therapeutic Alliance: Key to Success

Getting patients engaged in their physical therapy programs with a collaborative and active approach can be a challenge, especially with complex pain cases. Some patients have had previous negative experiences with physical therapists and have little trust in us initially as providers. Others are very fearful of activity or perhaps have little faith in their ability to change their condition. Some may feel like physical therapy is just a requirement by their MD or insurance before they can get the operation that will really fix them. With these types of difficulties and others with a complex patient, it can be challenging to build the therapeutic alliance needed to assist in driving behavior change and meaningful outcomes. However, since we have seen that a good therapeutic alliance is associated with decreased pain, improved patient satisfaction and patient compliance<sup>1,2,3</sup>, it is potentially even more important to build a strong therapeutic alliance with our most complex patients. When it is hard to establish a connection or therapeutic alliance with a patient, it is helpful to focus on evidence-based communication skills that assist with the goal of building a connection. Therapeutic alliance can be enhanced by utilizing active listening techniques, non-verbal communication techniques, appropriate tones of voice and by demonstrating empathy toward the patient's suffering. The Kaiser Permanente Four Habits Model is a helpful tool that can be utilized to assess your communication skills and develop a plan to improve your therapeutic alliance with complex pain patients. The four habits are:

1. Invest in the beginning: Create rapport quickly, elicit patient's concerns, plan the visit with the patient
2. Elicit the patient's perspective: Ask for patient's ideas, elicit specific requests, explore the impact on the patient's life
3. Demonstrate empathy: Be open to patient's emotions, make at least one empathetic statement, convey empathy nonverbally, be aware of your own reactions
4. Invest in the end: Deliver diagnostic information, provide education, involve patient in making decisions, complete the visit

You can find a copy of the Four Habits Model and more detailed information, including techniques and examples, at this link:

<https://www.thepermanentejournal.org/files/Fall1999/habits.pdf>.

Never underestimate the value of giving your complex patient in pain the experience of being heard and understood. Our relationship with a patient should feel more like a dance than a struggle. If you find yourself frustrated, judging or arguing with your patient, it might be necessary to pause your agenda for a few minutes and use active listening skills and other techniques from the Four Habits Model to establish the therapeutic alliance key to patient-centered care and successful outcomes.

1. Bliss EL. The roles of Attachment, Depression, and the Working Alliance in Predicting Treatment Outcomes in Chronic Pain Patients Seeking Physical Therapy Services. University of Miami. 2009: Open Access Dissertations. 301.
2. Ferreira PH, Ferreira ML, Maher CG, Refshauge KM, Latimer J, Adams RD. The therapeutic alliance between clinicians and patients predicts outcome in chronic low back pain. *Phys Ther.* 2013;93:470–8.
3. Fuentes J, Armijo-Olivo S, Funabashi M, et al. Enhanced therapeutic alliance modulates pain intensity and muscle pain sensitivity in patients with chronic low back pain: an experimental controlled study. *Phys Ther.* 2014;94(4):477-489.

Katie McBee, DPT, OCS, MS provided this Clinical Pearl. Katie is an active volunteer member of the PMSIG. She is Regional Director of WorkStrategies for Select Medical and is based in Louisville, KY. Her passion is learning and sharing new information on pain science and best practices for the treatment of pain for physical therapists. Katie spends a portion of her professional time developing new strategies to prevent and manage pain effectively and efficiently in outpatient practice under current payor models. Thank you Katie!