

Agenda Setting in Therapy

Within the Department of Defense (DoD), there is an ongoing demand for mental health services that is often hard for behavioral health clinics to meet. As such, the development of strategies to promote clinical efficiency with patients, while preserving the effectiveness of treatments is optimal. One simple way to do this is to include agenda setting within the structure of therapy sessions. In most Evidence-Based Psychotherapies (EBPs), agenda setting is a foundational concept.

Why Set an Agenda

Efficient Use of Time

Setting an agenda confirms that the relevant treatment goals are addressed in each session of treatment, which makes individual sessions more efficient and effective, thereby leading to a more rapid abatement of symptoms. Additionally, this leads to patients receiving the best possible care.

Client-Centered and Collaborative

Another benefit of agenda setting is that it ensures a focus on efficiency that does not diminish individual patient concerns or desired goals. When we begin a session by asking, “What problems do you want my help solving today?” we are demonstrating that focusing on the patient’s concerns is crucial. Providers can further promote this by asking patients to actively participate in the process of prioritizing their concerns to make certain they are addressed in the order of importance to the patient. A key element of most effective psychotherapies is provider-patient collaboration. Working together to form the session agenda and then subsequently working through the agenda topics in session nurtures a collaborative, therapeutic relationship.

Facilitation of Goal Setting and Skill Acquisition

While the process of agenda setting may be novel to many patients, learning this skill can help patients systematically address problems that arise in their life. Patients who learn how to engage in a problem-solving approach to the challenges may internalize therapy skills that will continue to be helpful when therapy ends. It’s important to socialize patients early to agenda setting in treatment by providing education on the process and the rationale for agenda setting. Providers can model agenda setting by coming to session with a preliminary outline of what is to be accomplished in the current session.

How to Set an Agenda

1. Discuss agenda setting at the first session

As mentioned earlier, agenda setting may be a new skill for many patients. As a result, introducing an agenda early in therapy will socialize patients to the process. Agenda setting can be introduced by saying, “Setting an agenda at the beginning of every session will help us both be on the same page when we meet. It is important to me that you feel treatment is focusing on your stated goals every session.”

2. Collaborate with the patient to identify agenda items

Typically, in EBP treatments, collaboration is essential. The session agenda can be set by both the provider and patient and can be initiated by the statement, “At the start of each session, we will come up with an agenda together. “What items would you like to put on the agenda for today’s session?”

3. Prioritize items

After identifying the agenda items, patients then prioritize them with the goal of having no more than 2-3 items per session. Some providers may find it difficult to maintain an agenda initially, especially with patients who are talkative or present with tangential speech. These tendencies likely contribute to a patient’s difficulties outside of session, so it’s important *not* to reinforce the use of unstructured time. While the agenda setting process may initially take about 5-10 minutes out of your session, through repetition and socialization, patients become proficient requiring as little as 2-3 minutes to complete.

4. Write agenda items down

Writing the agenda down on a white board or clip board where both the provider and patient can see it further helps to ensure it is followed.

5. Balance

It is important to strike a balance between attending to items on the agenda that help patients achieve goals established at the outset of treatment and dealing with important new items that surface. Additionally, providers should strike a healthy balance in facilitating agenda setting by using an empathic and supportive approach.

6. Revise agenda, as needed

Agenda setting is viewed as an ongoing part of the session, at times, it may even need to be revised mid-session. Items that are not discussed during the session should be placed on the agenda for the next session.

7. Homework

Some patients report difficulties remembering what occurred in previous sessions and have difficulty with agenda setting. For patients like this, a good homework assignment can be to have patients jot down potential agenda items and prioritize them before the next session.

Challenges to Agenda Setting

“I Don’t Know”

The “I don’t know” patient has difficulty identifying anything to put on the session agenda. Some potential solutions for this include:

- Review treatment goals or summarize the previous session
- Offer several choices of agenda material based on the previous session or treatment goals
- Assign agenda setting for homework
- Ask what the patient doesn’t want to talk about

Chatty Cathy/Charlie

The goal of agenda setting is to create a simple list of concerns. However, some patients will launch into a detailed description of an agenda item and have difficulty slowing down. Possible solutions for this include:

- Recognize the patient is having difficulty naming the problem
- Gently interrupt and say, “Shall we call this problem_____ and put it on the agenda?”
- Ask “What shall we call this problem?”

Too Many Agenda Items

At times, patients will list too many agenda items. When this occurs, consider doing the following:

- Assist patients to prioritize all agenda items and discuss the most important first
- Talk about how much time to spend on each item
- Place any agenda items that are not discussed on the agenda for the next session

Trivial Agenda Items

Sometimes patients will set a trivial agenda to avoid meaningful topics. Possible solutions to this challenge include:

- Suggest agenda topics (If a patient objects to this, explore the disadvantages of the topic.)
- Explore the patient's automatic thoughts (Talking about problems will make them worse.)
- Discuss ways of managing distress (e.g., taking a break, changing topics, engaging in distraction)
- Assign homework for patient to answer the question, "How does not talking about my problems make my life worse?"

Emotional Reaction to Agenda Setting

Occasionally, patients will have a strong emotional reaction when asked to set the agenda. Solutions to this problem include:

- Pull back and explore automatic thoughts by asking a question like, "What was going through your mind when I asked you for items to put on today's agenda?"
- If the emotional reaction is too strong to move forward, put agenda setting aside and deal with these emotions directly. Resume agenda setting at the beginning of the next session.

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