Aspiration, Appreciation, Gratitude and Optimism: Focusing on What’s Going Right

Clinical Tool

This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
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The findings of this investigation show that there is a point in being positive: patients who present with minor illness show greater satisfaction and are more likely to have recovered from their illness within 2 weeks if they receive a positive rather than a negative consultation.¹

We are trained, as mentioned in previous modules, to find the problem and fix it. One important aspect of Whole Health is to be sure to take time to look for what is right as well. Focusing on the positive is an important emphasis of the Personal Health Inventory.

The Aspirations Model

In the introduction to the in-person part of the Whole Health: Change the Conversation program, one of the first concepts that is introduced after the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being and the 3 P’s (personalized, proactive, patient-driven care) is the Aspirations Model. The Aspirations Model was created by the Institute for Alternative Futures (http://altfutures.com/).

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The Institute for Alternative Futures encourages various groups to use their vision of the future to change their approach in the present. The right side of the illustration represents an all-too-common way that we might experience some part of our lives, be it our health, our home environment, or our work. We play a defensive game, reacting over and over again to circumstances we are beset by until we feel trapped like a hamster on a wheel. This can lead to a sense of disempowerment and weariness (the “exhaust cloud”). Many patients are at a high risk for feeling this, given that they have so many different chronic health issues.

Alternatively, it is possible to focus on our aspirations—where we would like to be—and to base our day-to-day choices and actions on those aspirations. We may ask mindfully, at any given moment, how much our actions in the present are leading us to our desired outcomes. This can involve not only responding to circumstances, but also shifting behaviors. With a clear goal in mind, with the freedom to dream and aspire to something more, a person can experience change. It works beyond the patient level too; if we, as clinicians, focus on our aspirations, our experience of our work can change, and the system may even change, too.

Collaborating with patients to create their mission statement is one way to focus on aspirations. There is something heart-warming about having an individualized reason why we are taking care of someone. It can help clinicians to be more committed if they know that a patient wants to climb a mountain or be healthy enough to take a dream trip or to dance at a loved one’s wedding.

Always take a moment to ask...
- Why are we doing this work in the first place?
- Why does the conversation matter?
- What does the patient want his or her healing for?

Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Psychology

When integrative medicine fellows at the University of Wisconsin are first learning to construct Personal Health Plans (PHP), they are always asked to include a section early in their plan that focuses on what a given patient is doing right. Here is an example for Bob, the sample patient from the introductory modules:

*Bob, before we launch into some suggestions of other things you can do to improve your health, I want to take just a moment to acknowledge all that you are already doing. I appreciate that you are exploring different options online, and I look forward to discussing what you find there with you, hopefully giving you some useful advice based on my other patients’ experiences. I am struck by the importance of your relationships with your family and how clearly this shines through in your PHI as you describe helping your widowed daughter raise your grandchildren.*
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Even if there are times where the only positive thing you can say is, “Thanks for taking the time to show up,” that is something. Who knows how much time and energy a person might have invested simply to come in and see you?

Always take a moment to voice to patients what they are doing well and what they have working in their favor. This improves patient outcomes.

Focusing on strengths is the foundation for appreciative inquiry in the world of management theory. Like the Aspirations Model, appreciative inquiry focuses on what is going right, on assets. It draws from what is positive to support Whole Health and has the potential to revolutionize how we care for patients.3-5

This approach is also at the core of positive psychology, which was introduced as an area of psychology in 2000.

The field of positive psychology is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past), hope and optimism (for the future), and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, spirituality, talent, and wisdom.

At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.6

A 2013 meta-analysis of 39 studies with 6,139 participants concluded that positive psychology interventions led to improvements in subjective well-being and psychological well-being that, while small, were both significant and sustainable.7 Specifically, benefit was found in the reduction of depressive symptoms. More studies are needed, but in general, there seems to be no harm associated with positive psychology interventions.

If you see someone—even just intermittently—it is worth it to celebrate successes before moving on to what else he or she “should do.”

Optimism

Optimism is one important ingredient tied into positive psychology. Optimism reflects the extent to which people expect, in general, that their futures will be positive. Higher levels of optimism correlate with the following: 8

- Better subjective well-being in times of adversity
- Higher levels of engagement and less avoidance or disengagement
- Taking more steps to protect one’s health
- Better overall physical health
- Better success with relationships
- Higher income through persistence with education
In sum, the behavioral patterns of optimists appear to provide models of living for others to learn from, and we know that optimism, in general, improves health outcomes.\(^8\)

A reasonable amount of optimism can improve the quality of care we offer. Simply saying “I am optimistic that you will get better” in a PHP may have a significant impact.

At its best, the treatment plan becomes a map for healing that the [clinician] and the patient can navigate together... In so doing, we remind our patients that we have heard their story and have a sense of who they are and what is most important to them. Finally, the plan serves the patient as a tangible reminder of our belief that healing is possible.\(^9\)

Gratitude

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others. —Cicero

Gratitude, which is associated with habitually “…focusing on and appreciating the positive aspects of life,” is also worth considering in a PHP when one is attempting to focus on the positive aspects of a person’s life. Gratitude is associated with a number of benefits, including:\(^10,11\)

- Higher levels of alertness, determination, attentiveness, vitality, and enthusiasm
- Increased time spent exercising
- More sleep that is of better quality
- Fewer physical symptoms, including headaches, coughing, and pain
- Better immunity

For more information on these different areas, see Personal Development module and the related clinical tools, including Creating a Gratitude Practice.

Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health? Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php

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References