



# Society for HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

## **HELPING PATIENTS IMPROVE CHRONIC DISEASE SELF-MANAGEMENT IN A PANDEMIC**

Survey results indicate that patients increasingly struggle to manage chronic conditions in the context of delayed medical and mental health care and pandemic-related physical, emotional, and financial distress. No “silver bullets” exist to help patients with self-management of chronic disease, but remember these evidence based strategies:

- 🌀 *More frequent encounters:* Telehealth visits do not require transportation or time off work. Meeting with patients frequently via telehealth can help them stay on track with healthy behaviors. Consider engaging other professionals - health educators, behavioral health clinicians, nurses, or trained paraprofessionals. With telehealth, these team members no longer need to be in your office to be accessible. So, if your health system has these supportive resources consider connecting patients to them.
- 🌀 *Identify a target symptom or behavior:* Chronic disease management requires many health behaviors that often overwhelm patients. Ask patients what symptoms, functional impairments, or changes matter most and prioritize these. Encourage patients to focus on one or two realistic health behavior changes that they are most motivated to start and sustain. Encourage them to notice or identify opportunities for change and report back.
- 🌀 *Normalize, normalize, normalize* self-management challenges balanced with your belief that with persistence, they can succeed. Layer on empathy during these stressful times.
- 🌀 *Use family and community resources:* If a patient seems particularly “stuck”, seek permission to invite a support person or family member to a future appointment to help you collaboratively generate solutions. Also, help people connect to online support groups and consider pairing patients up with “peer buddies.”
- 🌀 *Remember motivational interviewing essentials:* Always ask permission to proceed with change conversations. Elicit, rather than propose, the target behavior or symptom most important to the patient. Elicit the patient’s *own* ideas for solutions, before asking permission to offer additional options. Ensure the goals are measurable and obtainable.
- 🌀 *Celebrate ANY success*, no matter how small. Just attending appointments regularly is a “win” for many patients.
- 🌀 *Don’t work harder than your patient:* If someone is in precontemplation (or “anti-contemplation!”), you may not be able to facilitate change at this point in time. Lie in wait for a critical incident or specific conversation that opens the door, then tentatively walk through. If the door is shut and locked, pushing harder isn’t going to change the situation.