



Behavioral Medicine in Sweet Success

OBJECTIVES

Behavioral Medicine Specialists are important members of the Sweet Success team **because they can facilitate the patient's adherence with her diabetes regimen.** It has been recognized that the third leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the U.S. is medical error (Starfield, 2000), including mistakes in medical care that result from miscommunication between healthcare provider and patient and the patient's non-adherence to the medical program.

Patients' problems with adherence to their treatments are complex. Cultural and psychosocial barriers rank among the important reasons for non-adherence. These barriers include:

- ❖ **Health beliefs**, including fears that the medication may be harmful and that "natural" products are safe (e.g. insulin is perceived as a "drug" and thus as harmful)
- ❖ **Fears of Western medical technology** among patients who come from non-U.S. cultures (e.g. the process of injecting one's abdomen is perceived as a violation of a safety shield around the baby)
- ❖ **Lack of interpersonal connection** and trust with the healthcare system (e.g. patients are more likely to follow the advice of a trusted friend than the advice of a perceived stranger; patients often are embarrassed to ask questions)
- ❖ **Psychosocial stress** in patients' every-day lives undermine adherence (e.g. fear of losing one's job due to the stigma of having a chronic illness makes patients deny their need for care; lack of tangible and emotional social support increase the difficulties of adhering to treatments)
- ❖ **Depression and anxiety** due to a medical condition (e.g. the hopelessness and sense of futility associated with depression can undermine adherence)

Behavioral Medicine Specialists, including social workers and family therapists, are trained and licensed to treat patients who present with these barriers.

- ❖ They conduct in-person sessions with the patient to elicit health beliefs and to treat fears.
- ❖ They teach problem-solving strategies and assertiveness to reduce stress at work and at home.
- ❖ They address the woman's safety and the well-being of her family, providing appropriate therapy and counseling in self-empowerment.
- ❖ Their treatment approaches include cognitive-behavior therapy to improve the depression and anxiety associated with diabetes.
- ❖ They communicate with the Sweet Success team about the patient's condition.
- ❖ They document their assessment and plan in the patient's chart.

Using these competencies, they work within the interdisciplinary team to promote adherence to the Sweet Success treatment plan.

REFERENCES

Starfield, B. (2000) Is US health really the best in the world? *JAMA*, 284 (4), 483-485