

Contextual Care Exercise¹

What is the best next thing for this patient at this time?

A note before you begin: It may be tempting to respond to questions below by saying that the physician would have done a better job if they'd had more time. While it may seem counter-intuitive, the length of time scheduled for an appointment has been demonstrated not to be relevant to the problems illustrated in the example below. There is research to show that when physicians explore, acknowledge, and respond to patients' individual situations and address underlying needs, visits are not on average any longer. That is not to deny that longer visits would be beneficial, just that they are not a factor in accounting for why decision making is patient-centered in some encounters but not in others, under similar time constraints.

CASE:

A patient's record indicates that he has missed 13 out of his last 19 appointments.

What would be your next step?

Scenario One:

The provider does not inquire why the patient has missed so many appointments and schedules labs, follow-up appointments with specialists and a return visit in six months.

What are your thoughts on this plan of care?

¹ These materials have been developed with support from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Any views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government.

Do you think the patient will attend all the scheduled appointments?

Why do you think the patient didn't spontaneously reveal to this provider the reasons he had missed appointments?

Why do you think the provider didn't ask *why* the patient had missed appointments?

Scenario Two:

Provider: "I see you missed some appointments. Would you share with me why?"

Patient: "My life is really chaotic right now. My daughter moved in with her kids and I don't always have the car. I think I'm going to make it in, and then it turns out I can't get here."

How does this information influence your thoughts about next steps?

Scenario Two (continued):

Provider: "What would help you get to your appointments?"

Patient: "I think it would be easier if they were all on one day."

Provider: "You can ask at the front desk when you leave if there's a way to do that. Have you also checked with transportation to see if there are any options? They might have vouchers to pay for the bus – could you take the bus?"

Patient: "I can look into that."

Provider: "I'll walk out with you to the registrar and see if there's a way to schedule visits on the same day so you don't have to make multiple trips."

Patient: "That would be great."

Do you think the patient will attend his upcoming appointments?

In Scenario Two, the provider was able to address the patient's context, or his life situation, as it impacted his ability to manage his health.

What are the challenges to incorporating a patient's context into a future plan of care?

Have you encountered a patient where their context impacted their ability to manage their care? What happened?

Were you able to incorporate the patient's context into the plan of care? What was the outcome?

What can providers do to explore and incorporate patient context?