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RESEARCH

Assessment of self-care and medication adherence in individuals with mental health conditions

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This descriptive study explored whether patients with mental health conditions engage in personal medicine (self-care activities) as part of their treatment regimen. Personal medicine is patient-identified and -initiated activities of self-care that can improve mental health through various means, including physical activity, social engagement, and spiritual connectedness. The purpose of this study was to explore patient engagement in personal medicine within an underserved population and to evaluate the impact self-care might have on self-reported medication use and adherence and patient perception of mental health control.

Design: Cross-sectional study design with a face-to-face verbally administered survey assessing medication adherence, engagement in self-care activities, perception of self-care, and mental health control.

Setting: The study site was a nonprofit charitable pharmacy in an urban setting. The pharmacy provides medications and pharmacy services at no charge, including disease state education, point-of-care testing, and medication therapy management.

Participants: Study participants included those who fill medications for mental health conditions and who are age 18 years and older.

Main outcome measures: Main outcomes included engagement in self-care and self-reported medication adherence. Additional measures included stratification of dimensions of self-care, perception of mental health control, and patient knowledge of community resources.

Results: Overall, 81.7% of participants engaged in activities of self-care, with 98.3% recognizing self-care as important to improving and maintaining their mental health. Greater self-reported adherence rates and mental health control were seen with patients who participate in self-care.

Conclusion: Participants who identify and engage in personal medicine recognize its value and are willing to incorporate it into their treatment regimen. As accessible and trusted health care providers, pharmacists can encourage patients to identify and use personal medicine to aid in the improvement of their mental health condition.

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One in 5 Americans is currently living with a mental health condition, with poor mental health contributing to more disability than other chronic illnesses, such as heart disease and cancer.^{1,2} In addition, those with serious mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and major depression,

have earlier mortality than those without mental health conditions.³ This can be attributed to various factors such as metabolic adverse effects of antipsychotic medications, sedentary lifestyles, delayed diagnoses of medical conditions, suicide, and limited access to care.^{3,4} Mental illness is a highly stigmatized condition, with patients often delaying care up to a decade after first symptom presentation because of many barriers, including social and structural stigma.^{5,6}

In terms of access to care, 1 in 5 adults with mental health conditions are unable to receive the care they need, with 1 in 4 adults with mental health conditions stating that they have difficulties obtaining care because of cost.⁷ Underserved patients disproportionately experience barriers to mental health care because of stigma and lack of coordination between

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Key Points**Background:**

- Self-care is the individual desire to make behavior changes in order to improve health and well-being.
- Personal medicine includes patient-identified activities of self-care that improve mood while reducing patient-reported mental health symptoms.
- The understanding and acceptance of personal medicine has not been studied in the setting of a pharmacy.

Findings:

- Patients had a high level of engagement and strong perceptions of the benefits of self-care.
- Patients are willing to increase their participation in self-care.
- Patients identify pharmacists as one of the providers of their mental health care.

mental health and medical care.⁸ This highlights a public health concern of unmet mental health care needs and an opportunity for targeted education and intervention. Especially in communities with large health disparities, pharmacists are already expanding their role in public health.⁹ By addressing health barriers such as access to care and low health literacy, pharmacists are able to bridge the gap and provide preventive measures, such as counseling on adherence and lifestyle modifications, that help patients manage chronic diseases successfully.^{9,10}

Pharmacists can be a significant part of the solution to the growing concern of limited access to mental health care. Community pharmacists are the most accessible health care professionals, with 70% of rural patients living within 15 miles of a pharmacy, and almost 90% of urban patients living within 2 miles of a pharmacy.¹¹ Data already show that when pharmacists are involved in mental health care, adherence rates improve, adverse effect burden is decreased, and patients are able to connect to other health professionals and community resources.^{12–14} For example, when pharmacists at an outpatient psychiatric clinic provided two 10–15-minute sessions of counseling and education, there was a statistically significant increase in adherence (18%), an increase in treatment satisfaction (6%), and a decrease in concern regarding antidepressant therapy (8%).¹⁵ In addition, medication therapy management (MTM) can serve as a vehicle to provide specialized mental health services, such as adherence coaching and shared decision making. This was the case at a safety net hospital noted to serve a diverse population, in which pharmacists incorporated shared decision-making tools into MTM to discuss patient-centered goals and to encourage identification and problem solving regarding medication-related concerns.¹⁶

Treatment of mental health conditions is multifaceted; it includes pharmacologic therapy and self-care, which should be an important component of chronic disease management.

Self-care has many definitions across different health professions. However, a review by Ausili et al.¹⁷ identified common themes of self-care to include an individual desire to make behavior changes as a means to improve health and well-being. Self-care management includes maintaining adherence to medical therapies and lifestyle changes such as diet and physical activity, recognizing and assessing uncontrolled symptoms, and collaborating with health professionals in shared decision making.¹⁷ When incorporated into therapy, self-care management has been shown to lead to better disease state control, reduction in overall health distress, and improved mental health.¹⁸

Self-care is also referred to as *personal medicine*, which is defined by Deegan¹⁹ to be when any patient identifies and initiates activities of self-care that decrease symptoms and improve overall mood, behavior, and sense of well-being. This definition is the result of a qualitative study in which participants were asked to describe their experience with mental health medications. In addition to expressing adverse effects and barriers to adherence, participants also spontaneously shared experiences about self-care activities that decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression while improving self-esteem.¹⁹ Personal medicine is different for every person, and it can include activities that give life meaning or purpose, such as identifying as a caring mother, a hard-working student, or a member of a social group. Personal medicine can also include self-care strategies to alleviate mental health symptoms through physical activity, spending time in nature, or being in the presence of loved ones.¹⁹

As a mechanism to identify personal medicine and to encourage patient empowerment and recovery, the Web-based platform *CommonGround* was created.²⁰ Patients interacted with the online application before their mental health appointment with the purpose of recognizing progress toward recovery and creating an avenue for shared decision making with providers.²⁰ A retrospective review from 12 behavioral health agencies that implemented *CommonGround* found that patients who engaged in personal medicine had statistically significantly higher scores in health functioning status, measuring both mental and physical health, as well as higher scores in overall symptom control than those with usual care ($P < 0.001$).²⁰ In addition, personal medicine was associated with positive experiences with pharmacotherapy, otherwise known as *pill medicine*, including a decreased report of adverse effects, decreased concern that the medication was affecting their physical health negatively, and increased perception that the medication was improving their condition.²⁰ Therefore, using activities described as personal medicine can empower the patient to take an active role in their recovery and to find a balance between the medications they take and the activities and mindfulness they practice.

Objectives

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore patient engagement in personal medicine and self-care strategies, and to understand the impact it can have on self-reported medication adherence and mental health control. Specific outcomes measured included rate of engagement in personal medicine (self-care activities) and rate of participation in different dimensions of self-care. The impact of

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