

Expectancy: an important ingredient for therapeutic change



What is expectancy?

Before starting psychological treatment for mental health problems, patients tend to have certain expectations or ideas about what therapy will involve. Some patients expect that it will be helpful, while other patients may be sceptical, less hopeful or even frightened and wary about therapy. The degree to which a patient expects therapy will be helpful is referred to as **outcome expectancy**.

How does expectancy influence treatment?

- Patients who have daunting expectations about therapy (e.g. “it will be difficult and I won’t be able to cope”) are less likely to turn up to an initial therapy appointment.¹
- Patients who report low expectations before starting therapy tend to report poorer scores in therapeutic alliance measures during treatment.² This suggests that poor expectations are an obstacle for patients to adequately connect with their therapists.
- Patients who report low expectations before starting therapy are less likely to engage with therapy tasks (e.g. homework)³ and tend to have poorer outcomes after treatment (e.g. persistent symptoms).⁴
- Therefore, providing information⁵ or educational interventions⁶ to clarify what patients can expect from therapy and to induce a sense of optimism can help to improve treatment retention and to reduce premature dropout.

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How can we assess expectancy?

Expectancy should be identified at the time of an initial assessment interview, before starting therapy, since it could become an obstacle to treatment. A simple way to assess expectancy is to (a) explain the rationale for treatment to a new patient and then (b) ask the following question:

At this point in time how confident are you that this kind of treatment will work for you on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (definitely)?

An answer to this question of 5 or less is indicative of low expectancy, and associated with higher risk of poor treatment outcomes.⁷ If patients struggle to provide an answer, this could also be indicative of unclear or low expectations, in which case further orientation about the benefits of treatment could be helpful.

References

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