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4 Things to Know When Working with Interdisciplinary Healthcare Teams

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Healthcare can be [draining and isolating](#). Clinicians are faced with long hours, difficult patients, and endless hoops to jump through for insurance. There is little room in a typical day to solve problems and focus on improving patient care. While many of us feel as if we work alone to treat our patients, the truth is that our patients are seen by a variety of practitioners. Working in an intentionally interdisciplinary healthcare model can combat many of the issues faced by clinicians when working alone. These models create a platform for voicing problems and allow a space to solve those problems. When done well, they bring about [a good sense of camaraderie and teamwork](#) as clinicians work toward a common goal.



[Interdisciplinary teamwork](#) is a complex process involving two or more health professionals with complementary backgrounds and skills. In this process, team members share common health goals in assessing, planning, or evaluating patient care. This is accomplished through interdependent collaboration, open communication, and shared decision-making (1,2).

I have worked in 3 settings with interdisciplinary teams: Post-Acute Rehabilitation, Home Health, and Chronic Pain Rehabilitation. Interdisciplinary teams can work in a multitude of settings and have just as little as two different professions, i.e. a team of Physicians and Nurses. Successful interdisciplinary teams meet regularly to collaborate on patient care, communicate effectively, and have a common goal.

As a member of an interdisciplinary healthcare team, there are several things to know in order to optimize your experience, your team's experience, and patient outcomes.

Know your role

In an interdisciplinary healthcare team, it's all about melding clinical expertise from each team member to best serve patients. To succeed, you need to know what role you play.

- **Know what your role is as a professional.** Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Psychologists, Speech Therapists, Physicians, and Nurses all play a particular role in interdisciplinary teams, and this role can vary based on the setting.
- **Know your expertise.** As a professional, you may work with others of the same profession. Make sure you know what you bring to the table—your strengths and your specific experiences.
- **Know your team members' roles.** It's important to know what each of your team members do in patient care and in their role in an interdisciplinary team. Often, roles overlap and blend, but each team member embodies a specific role. This role will change based on the setting. If you don't know, do some research or just ask 😊

It's also important to know what each professional brings to the table — what is their past working experience? How do they treat and relate to patients? What specific training do they have? Often, this information will reveal itself as you work in the team, but it also doesn't hurt to ask.

Know the end goal

What is the purpose of your interdisciplinary team? Is it to reduce patients' pain? Improve function? Improve quality of life? All team members need to be on the same page and need to be connected to the mission for the interdisciplinary team to be successful.

Communicate compassionately

Members of the interdisciplinary team need to feel comfortable to voice their opinion. Team members need to feel comfortable addressing tensions and misunderstandings. This comfortability takes time to build but can be fostered by encouraging all members to [speak in a respectful manner](#) to each other and about their patients.

Support structure

An interdisciplinary healthcare team needs structure. The team does not necessarily need to have a hierarchy (actually it's better if it doesn't), but someone needs to play the role of "director" to guide, support, and facilitate discussions and relationships between members. All members should feel like they play an equal role. It is part of the director's job to ensure everyone has this sense of equality. If you are the director, you need to ensure that all members are playing an equal role. If someone is not speaking up enough, prompt them. If someone is hogging the air time, let them



know. If you are not the director, be aware of the intricacies of the interdisciplinary team and help to facilitate this structure by speaking up and then passing the mic.

Interdisciplinary teams are wonderful for collaborating with other professions to work toward improving a patient's health and quality of life. When I worked in an Interdisciplinary Pain Treatment Program, there were many times when I would become frustrated with a patient's lack of progress or was unsure of what treatment approach to take with a new patient. I would look forward to Thursdays, when staffing was held, so I could bounce ideas off my team members and devise the best plan of action.

"Breakthrough innovation occurs when we bring down boundaries and encourage disciplines to learn from each other." – Gyan Nagpal

I'll never forget one of our patients, Bill. He was quite miserable and we spent a majority of our sessions arguing about our treatment approach. Despite my best efforts, he could not seem to grasp the concept of not causing increased pain with exercise and would yell and grumble throughout our sessions. He was convinced he was doing everything right, but as I tried to repeatedly explain to him, if he was having increased pain, there was something that needed to change.

After several visits with the patient, I finally vented in staffing. It turned out, the Occupational Therapist and the Clinical Psychologist were having the same issues with him. They had found if they explained things once to him and then let him use trial and error, he was able to come to a solution that allowed him to complete a task or exercise without increasing pain. I followed their advice. I "stepped back" from Bill's sessions, giving him room to come to his own conclusions. Bill and I found a solid rhythm where I was able to help him manage his pain and have a good time in the process.

After many sessions, he was no longer a miserable man. He was actually quite the opposite. I found myself looking forward to our sessions and would lightheartedly tease him about his need to buy endless "quick fix" exercise equipment from QVC. I will never forget the broad smile on his face when I shook his hand as he left his last session. With the help of our interdisciplinary team, he truly was able to become a better version of himself and live with less pain.

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Reference

1. Nancarrow SA, Booth A, Ariss S, Smith T, Enderby P, Roots A. [Ten principles of good interdisciplinary team work](#). Human Resources for Health. 2013;11:19. doi:10.1186/1478-4491-11-19.
2. Bader, Carrie and Jaeger, Margarete, "[What Makes an Interdisciplinary Team Work? A Collection of Informed Ideas, Discussion Prompts, and Other Materials to Promote an Atmosphere of Collaboration, Trust, and Respect](#)" (2014). Innovative Practice Projects. 42.

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