Care Predictor™

The Therapeutic Alliance: How your client relationship impacts outcomes

A study of the client/therapist relationship and the role it plays in the effectiveness of therapy | October 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Where mental health care providers have relied on therapists' credentials, years of experience, and methodological expertise to increase client outcomes, new research shows a positive Therapeutic Alliance to be a significantly stronger and underutilized predictor of positive outcomes for help-seekers. Therapeutic Alliance refers to the strength of the interpersonal connection between a care provider and a client. Most approaches to therapeutic alliance are reductive, and the effects of high no-show rates, early discontinuation of care, and therapist turnover continue to go misdiagnosed and unaddressed. The need for a comprehensive, data-driven instrument for measuring and improving Therapeutic Alliance is overdue. The Care Predictor Index (CPI) is a new tool that helps mental and behavioral health care providers ensure a stronger connection between therapists and clients. Based on recent research and verified by data drawn from over 105,000 care sessions, the CPI is a tool that providers use to predict the strength of the therapeutic alliance individual therapists and counselors are likely to achieve. By administering the Index, providers experience better therapeutic outcomes, greater consistency in client retention, stronger organizational culture through more efficient training, and lower staff turnover.

Our mission at Care Predictor is to improve the lives of help-seekers by equipping their health care providers with simple and effective solutions based in science.

We believe that all health care practices should be verified by comprehensive data analysis and measured by their outcomes for clients. Virtual mental health care has grown fivefold in use in the U.S. since the COVID-19 pandemic, at once creating new opportunities for studying information on care effectiveness while also increasing our responsibility to use technology to hone and disseminate best practices.

Care Predictor was founded to serve providers as their partner in technology for the betterment of their clients and teams. Our research has shown that change is driven by people. And the solutions we offer providers focus on that all-important human component to the process of transformation.

We've been looking for solutions in the wrong place.

Labeled "the other deadly pandemic," recent estimates put the number of people who suffer from mental unhealth and substance abuse globally at 1 billion.[2] Over 14% of deaths worldwide are directly related to mental health disorders. The economic toll is equally staggering, with mental disorders accountable for 32% of total years of disability.[3] Training therapists and counselors to meet this need will continue to be a challenge, as the rate of growth in the profession is expected to increase by 9% over the next decade.[4]

Yet training health care professionals is only half the battle. Educators and employers have contributed to a change in the culture of mental wellness by combating the social stigma that prevents many from seeking help. And especially since the pandemic, providers have expanded their use of technology to make care more accessible through virtual therapy and crisis counseling. Today, 59% of mental health care clients say they would seek virtual help, and this proportion is significantly higher among young adults.[5]

Still, despite these advances in mental health care training, culture, and accessibility, the state of mental wellness in the U.S. remains poor, and health care providers continue to experience frustrating rates of client disengagement. The global average no-show rate for therapy and counseling appointments is at 23%.[6] Dropout rates stand at 20%, with more than 70% of dropouts occurring after the first or second visits.[7] And while client outreach and integration of technology can improve these statistics, no-shows and discontinuation of care remain detrimental to treatment outcomes as well as to the organizational health of care providers.

For decades, we have known that the main causes of inadequate treatment outcomes are not primarily a lack of training or resources but are failures in how care is organized and measured. As early as 2001, the U.S. Institute of Medicine concluded that "quality problems occur typically not because of failure of goodwill, knowledge, effort or resources devoted to health care, but because of fundamental shortcomings in the ways care is organized."[8] And given the availability of new data pulled from virtual health meetings, it is imperative that we investigate the organizational and human factors that we now know to be the most powerful predictors of positive client outcomes.

Treatment Insights

59% of mental health care clients say they would seek virtual help

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The global average no-show rate for therapy and counseling appointments

20%
Therapy dropout rate

70%
Percentage of dropouts occurring after the first or second visits

Therapeutic Alliance — a better predictor of outcomes.

In 2021, the Care Predictor team conducted a multimodal research initiative to better understand the relationship between client engagement and low treatment outcomes. Scientific literature on mental health care suggested that the deficiency resided not in the clinical attributes of the provider (their experience or methodology), nor in client access to care, but rather in the interpersonal connection between the clinician and the client — what is known as the therapeutic alliance. The therapeutic alliance is the bond formed between the provider and the help-seeker, and the effectiveness of this bond consists in how quickly a connection is established, the agreement of goals for treatment, and the patient's experience of the therapist's empathy.[9]

The Therapeutic Alliance influences mental health treatment by opening paths for change across the entirety of the psycho-social spectrum — from precognitive affect, to emotions and organized thought, to personal and social behavior. In effect, the therapeutic alliance represents the extent to which human relationship plays a part in driving change.

It is because of the universal influence of such interpersonal connection that, according to recent research, the Therapeutic Alliance is proven to be a powerful predictor of treatment outcomes. It is more predictive, in fact, than clinical competency, reflective ability, years of experience, or specific treatment modality.[10] Indeed, the impact of therapeutic alliance on treatment outcomes is seven times greater than that of the specific treatment modality utilized with a client.[11] The reason for this is that the perception of a strong bond between the therapist and the client has a similar effect to that of social support. Hence, a positive alliance improves effort, endurance, and wellbeing during treatment, while simultaneously reducing the experience of pain. The most notable deliverance of this positive interpersonal connection is the perseverance of the help-seeker. Given that most clients drop out of therapy before their third session, the early establishment of the therapeutic alliance is critical to successful treatment. Indeed, the therapeutic alliance is most predictive of treatment outcomes when measured early in the treatment process.[12]

An additional and imperative conclusion drawn from the scientific research on therapeutic alliance is that the single most important organizational factor in improving quality and longevity of care is the interpersonal profile of the therapist. Studies show that what differentiates positive from negative treatment outcomes has far more to do with the ability of the therapist to form a bond with the client than it does with the client's willingness to connect with the therapist.[13] In fact, the emergence of positive feelings that drive change and lead to continuation of care coincides with the presence of certain personal characteristics of therapists.[14] Thus, dropout rates for the least effective therapists are four times higher than for the most effective therapists; and the client recovery rates of the least effective therapists are less than half of those attained by the most effective therapists.[15]

In summary, although we've known that the most effective providers may be up to ten times more efficient than the average provider, many have neglected what is often the root cause of deficient outcomes. We need to strengthen the therapeutic alliance of our behavioral health careby changing the way we organize, train, and measure the effectiveness of clinical personnel.

The Therapeutic Alliance is the measure of collaboration between the therapist and client – characterized by 3 features:

1. Mutually developed treatment goals

2. Alignment on treatment tasks

3. The emotional bond between the therapist and client

People Drive Change

The Care Predictor™ Index (CPI) predicts a behavioral health care provider's ability to form a strong Therapeutic Alliance with a help seeker. It is an instrument for recruiting, training, and evaluating client-facing personnel. The scoring algorithm for this index is built upon an extensive exploration of the existing published literature and is continually enhanced through the analysis of clinical data, including initial data from 300 behavioral health care providers who have completed the assessment. Coupled with feedback we have obtained by hosting over 105,000 care sessions, the CPI is a powerful screening tool for identifying providers who are likely to forge strong therapeutic alliances.

Utilizing data points on personality, attachment style, and self-efficacy collected from each care provider through a 240-item assessment, the CPI identifies specific variables predictive of the therapeutic alliance. It then consolidates these variables into key combinations to determine relevant personal attributes. And it weights these personal attributes to calculate an omnibus score predictive of a care provider's ability to form a strong therapeutic alliance with a help seeker. This Care Predictor Index can then be used by employers to make hiring decisions and to guide care provider training.

To measure personality, the CPI uses the Analog to Multiple Broadband Inventories.[16] This assessment was designed to model eight separate personality inventories in one instrument and has demonstrated convergent validity to each of these previously validated measures. To measure attachment style, the CPI utilizes the Adult Attachment Questionnaire.[17] This assessment has been demonstrated as reliable and valid for measuring attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance.[18] To measure counselor self-efficacy, the CPI utilizes the Counselor Activity Self Efficacy Scales, shown to be a reliable and valid measure of self efficacy as it relates to counseling skills.[19]

How it Works

The Care Predictor™ is designed to increase treatment outcomes by assisting in employee management, education, and organizational culture. It is for psychiatrists, therapists, support counselors, and BHNPs. Yet the Care Predictor applies to all client-facing personnel. A supplemental instrument, the Supportive Care Predictor Index,™ can be used to assist with the hiring, management, and training of supportive care roles, including doctors, nurses, case managers, care managers, reception, behavioral health technicians, security, and discharge coordinators.

Recruiters and hiring managers use the Index to receive predictive reports on candidates' personal attributes relevant to their potential clinical effectiveness. These attributes outline the crucial predictive traits for successfully forming a strong therapeutic alliance, and they help organizations avoid making assumptions based on less predictive information, such as a candidate's work background.

The Care Predictor™ also aids in management and evaluation. The Index can be used to generate reports that offer objective, data-driven insights into staff performance to identify strengths, address gaps, and provide actionable suggestions for skills development. The information drawn from a given provider's CPI report is tailored to their client engagement. This transforms a client's "file" from a one-sided view to a 360-degree perspective that incorporates the behaviors of the provider to the end of improving the therapeutic alliance. This tailored digital vantage point includes conventional notes on client history and therapeutic modality but integrates them into a holistic evaluation of the effectiveness of the provider-client history.

Using a provider's report, supplemented by data taken from over 105,000 counseling sessions, the Care PredictorTM offers an unparalleled facility for improving individualized therapist training. Areas of needed improvement are identified by combining a provider's CPI profile with information drawn from their client engagement and with the most significant predictors of therapeutic alliance. The resulting report illuminates areas of recommended development.

The Care PredictorTM offers ongoing training through modules created for each key area. For example, a provider with a below average CPI score will be recommended to complete a module targeting improvement in a specific area, such as "Active Listening" or "Building Familiar Warmth." While many of the traits measured by the Index tend to correspond to specific personality types, the Care Predictor's approach to training and management locates these traits in behaviors that can be improved through education and coaching. Improvement is then updated through subsequent therapy sessions and CPI screenings, providing managers with clear information to evaluate providers and set objective goals.

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