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3 Achievable Strategies for Boosting Patient Retention in Outpatient Therapy

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Overview

Patient retention is one of the biggest challenges for outpatient therapy practices. In fact, 7 out of 10 patients drop out and the industry no-show rate is 14.1 percent.[1]

Yet improving patient retention rates can significantly impact revenue. According to a study by Harvard Business School, increasing customer or patient retention by just 5 percent is likely to result in at least a 25 percent increase in revenue.[2] In addition, satisfied patients often experience better outcomes and are more likely to recommend your services to others, creating a virtuous cycle.[3]

Why do so many patients drop out? Outpatient therapy can be a challenging process and patients are coming to you at a vulnerable time. On top of that, they're often juggling appointments and home exercise sessions with busy schedules and multiple competing responsibilities, while expecting a tailored experience and a high level of convenience. That's why it's so crucial to adopt a patient-centered approach to care that improves rapport, engagement, and access—and why so many outpatient rehab organizations are using this approach to drive better patient retention and outcomes.

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

We believe that there are three key best practices for adopting patient-centered care:

- Streamlining the patient experience so that it's simple, straightforward, and easy to navigate.
- Training staff on patient-centered care and good communication skills in order to build therapeutic alliance and trust from the beginning.
- Engaging patients throughout the course of care with effective patient education and engagement tools.

In this guide, we dive into these three strategies for boosting patient retention, with each strategy divided into three levels. Use these levels to assess and improve your patient experience, wherever your organization is currently at in that endeavor.

For each of these three strategies, the journey culminates in **leveling up** with digital tools to deliver an exceptional patient experience and the best possible outcomes.

Leveling Up: Improving the Care Journey in 3 Key Areas

	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
PATIENT EXPERIENCE	**Level 1:** Create a Patient-Friendly Onboarding Experience	Level 1: Create a Patient-Friendly Onboarding Experience **Level 2:** Enhance Access to High-Quality Care	Level 1: Create a Patient-Friendly Onboarding Experience Level 2: Enhance Access to High-Quality Care **Level 3:** Automate Communication and Reminders
STAFF TRAINING	**Level 1:** Provide a High Level of Clinical Skill	Level 1: Provide a High Level of Clinical Skill **Level 2:** Establish Rapport with Patients	Level 1: Provide a High Level of Clinical Skill Level 2: Establish Rapport with Patients **Level 3:** Measure, Improve, and Promote
PATIENT ENGAGEMENT	**Level 1:** Educate Patients Along the Way	Level 1: Educate Patients Along the Way **Level 2:** Assess Each Patient's Level of Engagement	Level 1: Educate Patients Along the Way Level 2: Assess Each Patient's Level of Engagement **Level 3:** Strengthen Engagement with Technology

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Streamline the Patient Experience

Because your patients are busy, the care they receive needs to be simple to initiate, navigate, and access. And as 21st century healthcare consumers, patients expect this level of convenience. Modernize your patient experience and let patients know you're on their side by making it easier for them to get started at your clinic, remember appointments, and receive high-quality care.

1 Level 1: Create a Patient-Friendly Onboarding Experience

Create a good first impression before patients even walk in the door by ensuring that their experience is smooth from a process standpoint with strategies like:

- Streamlining the number of forms that need to be filled out and making the scheduling process clear and easy for patients by investing in a good patient portal.

- Minimizing office wait times by gathering patient information beforehand, using a queue app, and adopting a late-arrival policy.

- Training your front desk staff to be efficient, well-organized, clear, and friendly with effective, high-quality soft skills training.

2 Level 2: Enhance Access to High-Quality Care

To improve convenience for busy patients, consider:

- Using telehealth as an alternative to some in-person appointments whenever appropriate.

- Allowing patients to access their home exercise programs in different ways, including:

  - Email and SMS.

  - Via an online patient portal accessible from a laptop or desktop, or through a mobile app.

59%
of Gen Y patients say they would switch doctors for one with better online access.[3]

Among patients who are willing to use telehealth,

61%
say they'd use it for convenience and faster service.[4]

③ Level 3: Automate Communication and Reminders

Many outpatient therapy practices experience a high rate of no-shows and cancellations. Level up your technology to encourage patient engagement and adherence by:

- Sending automated appointment reminders, one of the most effective methods for encouraging patients to show up for their appointments.

- Using a home exercise app that allows patients to set triggers to complete their exercise plans at their convenience.

- Ensuring that your home exercise app allows patients to communicate with clinicians between sessions for additional guidance as needed.

57%

of patients expect doctors to send automated text, voice, or email reminders urging them to schedule appointments.[5]

HOW MEDBRIDGE CAN HELP

Wherever your organization is at in the process of streamlining the patient experience, **MedBridge** can help. From creating patient-friendly onboarding processes to improving access to care and automating communication, our solutions can help you engage patients and keep them coming back.

Patient Mobile App

Transform the patient experience with easy-to-follow, achievable home exercises that patients can access from the convenience of their mobile device, along with in-app messaging and notifications for increasing engagement and adherence.

HEP Builder

Build easy-to-use, customizable home exercise programs that patients can easily access in a variety of formats, including print, online, and mobile.

Telehealth Virtual Visits

Improve access to care and enhance communication between visits with our effective, user-friendly telehealth tool that is integrated with MedBridge HEP and patient engagement tools.

Build Therapeutic Alliance and Trust

Caring for patients using a combination of clinical skill and empathy is the key to helping them feel valued, understood, and empowered to complete their care plans. Ensure that your providers have the education they need to provide this level of care, and that you have effective tools in place for measuring the patient experience and making targeted improvements.

1 Level 1: Provide a High Level of Clinical Skill

When providers are able to convey mastery and confidence, patients are more likely to gain trust in the treatment process and be motivated to complete their care plans. Ensure that providers are proficient with the latest best practices and key areas of specialization by:

- Identifying any areas or patterns of low performance within your organization using outcomes and reporting tools.

- Closing skill gaps and building clinical expertise with high-quality continuing education in a variety of formats, including targeted clinical training, short-format refresher courses, and professional development.

In a recent study, caregiver confidence was strongly associated with a better patient experience.[6]

2 Level 2: Establish Rapport with Patients

Look at whether your clinicians demonstrate not just excellent clinical skills but effective communication skills. Clinical knowledge and skills are essential, but listening to patients and understanding their perspective is just as important. Help clinicians establish a good rapport with patients so that they feel understood from the beginning by training them in techniques such as:

- Initial alliance building through slowing down, making eye contact, smiling, and demonstrating knowledge of the patient, in order to help patients feel like clinicians are working with them as a team and their participation is vital.

- Successfully collecting subjective information to discover patient preferences and expectations, and determine what would make each individual patient feel successful in therapy.

- Building rapport and buy-in during the physical exam by spending more time listening and explaining.

- Explaining concepts in ways that patients can understand, and delivering ongoing education as patients continue through therapy *(See page 8 for Patient Expectations Diagram)*.

A 2018 study demonstrated that positive assurance from providers helped reduce patient symptoms.[7]

Patient Expectations

Find out what patients most commonly expect from their care providers.

COMMUNICATION

- ✓ Builds trust by demonstrating empathy
- ✓ Caring, friendly, supportive
- ✓ Inspires confidence
- ✓ Gives clear explanations

PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR

- ✓ Punctual
- ✓ Honest and has appropriate skill
- ✓ Is clean and hygienic
- ✓ Keeps up-to-date with the patient's medical history

HIGH-QUALITY SERVICE

- ✓ Creates a warm and welcoming environment
- ✓ Provides a diagnosis and self-help strategies
- ✓ Delivers individualized, hands-on treatment
- ✓ Patient can easily access care when help is needed

Patient Communication Course Series

Ensure that your staff has the skills to properly communicate with and engage patients with our expert-led three-course series that focuses on understanding patient expectations and building therapeutic alliance throughout the course of care.

- **Understanding Therapeutic Alliance and Patient Expectations**
- **Building Therapeutic Alliance in the Patient Evaluation**
- **Enhancing Patient Engagement Throughout the Course of Care**

3 Level 3: Measure, Improve, and Promote

Whether or not your organization has mastered the ability to deliver a great patient experience, it's important to continually measure the quality of that experience so that you can identify areas that need improvement and make changes before any problems worsen. You can do so by:

- Sending out Net Promoter Score® (NPS®) surveys, the gold standard for assessing patient loyalty.

- Consistently and frequently tracking this data to gain crucial insights.

- Improving low NPS® scores with targeted training.

Improving patient satisfaction survey results by just one point can lead to increased profits of

$1,443

per patient per day.[8]

HOW MEDBRIDGE CAN HELP

Wherever your organization is at in the process of improving therapeutic alliance and trust with patients, **MedBridge** can help. From boosting clinical excellence and establishing better rapport with patients to measuring and improving the patient experience, our solutions can help you engage patients and keep them coming back.

Training on Patient-Centered Care

Help your clinicians learn to deliver excellent patient-centered care, including building therapeutic alliance, understanding patient expectations, and improving patient engagement to reduce drop-offs and boost outcomes.

NPS® Booster Shots

Boost patient satisfaction—and your organization's NPS® score—with short, targeted courses to remedy gaps in your team's interpersonal skills.

Net Promoter® Score

Capture patient satisfaction, build a patient-inspired culture, and grow your brand awareness with our NPS® surveys and dashboards.

Certification Prep Programs

Give your clinicians the tools they need to pass the test, gain experience and confidence, and advance their careers—all while earning CEUs.

Continuing Education

Improve clinical knowledge across your organization with over 1,000 accredited courses across multiple disciplines and specialties.

Microlearning

Quickly address skill gaps with bite-size, point-of-care training for your team.

Enhance Patient Engagement Throughout the Course of Care

When clinicians are able to meet patients where they are, patients tend to feel more supported, motivated, and engaged. Ensure that your clinicians can properly assess and respond to the needs of individual patients, and learn how your organization can strengthen that engagement with the right digital tools.

1 **Level 1: Educate Patients Along the Way**

Education is key to helping patients improve self-efficacy and achieve good results. If patients don't understand how therapy can help improve their condition, they're much less likely to stick with it. To help inform and motivate patients, clinicians can:

- Help patients identify their main goals, whether that's returning to a competitive sport, being able to pick up a grandchild, or feeling less pain from day to day. That way, patients will better understand the value of therapy for them as individuals and why it's worth continued effort.

- Use active listening to better understand patients' questions and areas of confusion.

- Clearly explain to patients their condition and how completing their treatment plan will help them achieve their goals.

- Use high-quality educational tools such as handouts, videos, and diagrams that help illuminate these areas without too much length or jargon.
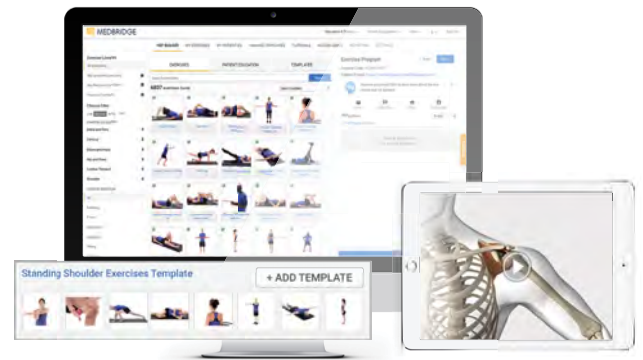
2 Level 2: Assess Each Patient's Level of Engagement

Not all patients come into the clinic with the same level of confidence and motivation. Clinicians need to be receptive, committed, and collaborative with patients in order to help them gain the confidence they need to take a more active role in their own health.

Patients generally arrive for the first time in one of three stages of engagement: Dependence, empowerment, or self-determination. It's important to assess which stage patients are at and engage with them in each stage to help them improve confidence and take charge of more decisions with their health.

DEPENDENCE STAGE

In this stage, patients might be feeling scared, unsure, helpless, overwhelmed, or discouraged. They tend to need more positive reinforcement and guidance from their provider to avoid losing momentum.

Strategies for helping

Working with patients in the dependence stage can take a lot of emotional energy. Help your clinicians develop and demonstrate empathy by thinking about times they've faced a scary situation and by using phrases with their patients like "I'm sorry you've had to deal with this" and "I would feel ___ in your situation too."

In this stage, clinicians should aim to understand before being understood, find the positive, minimize the patient's mental and physical load, and avoid rushing the patient. Doing so will help establish a good foundation of trust and allow the patient to grow into deeper levels of self-efficacy and engagement.

EMPOWERMENT STAGE

In this stage, patients are feeling more confident, motivated, and interested, but still need to know that clinicians will be there if they need them. Patients who have made it this far usually have good compliance and buy-in, as well as a lot of questions about how things work.

Strategies for helping

Clinicians should act more as coaches than mentors, bringing the patient into the decision making process by asking, "What questions do you have?" and "How does that work for you?" During this time, it's important for clinicians to provide a lot of information to patients to facilitate their learning, encourage their attempts at independence, and allow them to go through some trial and error on their own in order to find what does and doesn't work.

SELF-DETERMINATION STAGE

In this stage, patients are confident, informed, and want additional information as needed to make their own decisions.

Strategies for helping

Clinicians should take a step back and allow for more autonomy in patients who have reached this stage, even when they don't do everything asked of them. Clinicians can also help these patients explore their vision for their health by asking questions like, "Where do you want to be?," "What do we need to do to help you get there?," and "What do you think the next step is?"

③ Level 3: Strengthen Engagement with Technology

As your clinicians help patients move through the different stages of engagement, you can support, reinforce, and deepen this process by:

- Incorporating digital tools like in-app notifications and gamification to keep patients on track, interested, and activated.

- Leverage telehealth, patient messaging, and real-time feedback tools to allow patients to ask questions, practice techniques with guidance from their clinician, and provide updates on adherence and difficulty levels between appointments.

HOW MEDBRIDGE CAN HELP

Wherever your organization is at in the process of improving patient engagement, **MedBridge** can help. From high-quality patient education and effective soft-skills training to digital tools that help keep patients activated, our solutions can help you improve patient adherence and outcomes.

Training on Patient-Centered Care

Help your clinicians learn to deliver excellent patient-centered care, including building therapeutic alliance, understanding patient expectations, and improving patient engagement to reduce drop-offs and boost outcomes.

HEP Best Practices Microlearning

Equip your team with the skills to provide care plans that encourage and motivate patients, incorporate their values, and eliminate barriers to completion.

HEP Builder

Build easy-to-use, customizable home exercise programs that patients can easily access in a variety of formats, including print, online, and mobile.

Patient Mobile App

Transform the patient experience with easy-to-follow, achievable home exercises that patients can access from the convenience of their mobile device, along with in-app messaging and notifications for increasing engagement and adherence.

Patient Education

Help patients quickly and comprehensively understand their diagnosis and rehabilitation plan with engaging education.

Telehealth Virtual Visits

Improve access to care and enhance communication between visits with our effective, user-friendly telehealth tool that is integrated with MedBridge HEP and patient engagement tools.

Conclusion

Outpatient therapy can be a demanding process, and patients are likely to be juggling additional lifestyle demands and even experiencing discomfort and fear as the result of their injury or condition. That's why it's important to make the therapy experience as patient-friendly as possible in order to help patients initially feel at ease, gain confidence as they go, and ultimately reach their goals with a high level of self-efficacy.

By incorporating the strategies in this guide—starting with training your clinicians on building therapeutic alliance and ultimately leveling up with digital care tools—you can help your patients succeed. As a result, they'll be more likely to experience improved outcomes and satisfaction, return to your clinic for ongoing care, and refer others.

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About the Author

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Craig is an owner and the CEO of Rehabilitation & Performance Institute, a private practice with offices in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. Craig believes that high-quality one-on-one care, professional flexibility, and profits can all exist together.
He recognizes this approach empowers both therapists and patients. As a result, he is also a founder of Private Practice Rebellion, a group dedicated to helping physical therapists build their dream practice without sacrificing their dream lifestyle.
In addition, he serves as the assistant managing editor of Impact Magazine and is a lecturer in the University of Evansville Doctor of Physical Therapy Program. Craig received his Master of Physical Therapy degree from the University of Evansville and his Master of Health Administration degree from the University of Southern Indiana.

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Your Complete Solution for Boosting Patient Retention

As you saw in the guide, with the high patient attrition rate in outpatient therapy, it's essential to improve the patient experience in order to keep patients satisfied, engaged, and loyal to your clinic.

MedBridge provides the staff training and patient engagement tools you need to implement a patient-centered approach to care that drives better patient retention and outcomes.

PRODUCTS

Patient Experience Solution

Transform the patient experience and lead the field in healthcare technology with an interactive solution proven to better motivate patients, develop patient loyalty, and drive brand awareness.

Training on Patient Centered Care

Help your clinicians learn to deliver excellent patient-centered care, including building therapeutic alliance, understanding patient expectations, and improving patient engagement to reduce drop-offs and boost outcomes.

HEP Builder

Build easy-to-use, customizable home exercise programs that patients can easily access in a variety of formats, including print, online, and mobile.

Patient Education

Help patients quickly and comprehensively understand their diagnosis and rehabilitation plan with engaging education.

Telehealth Virtual Visits

Improve access to care and enhance communication between visits with our effective, user-friendly telehealth tool that is integrated with MedBridge HEP and patient engagement tools.

Patient Mobile App

Keep patients engaged in their care plans with home exercises in easy-to-follow, achievable daily doses along with automatic reminders, progress tracking, and in-app messaging.

Patient Adherence Tracking

Identify behavioral patterns and barriers to adherence to help boost patient satisfaction and improve clinical outcomes.

Net Promoter® Score

Capture patient satisfaction, build a patient-inspired culture, and grow your brand awareness with our NPS® surveys and dashboards.

NPS® Booster Shots

Boost patient satisfaction—and your organization's NPS® score—with short, targeted courses to remedy gaps in your team's interpersonal skills.