

Your Right to Choose

Using Shared Decision Making to Support Your Recovery

Information for People Using Mental Health Services

*Creating Dialogue
Promoting Choice
Supporting Recovery*

If you don't speak, you can't be heard. When people see that I'm involved in what's going on in my life, they have a certain kind of respect for me and will approach me in that manner.

— Darren, a person who uses mental health services

Understanding Shared Decision Making

Shared decision making is about having collaborative and satisfying conversations with providers about your treatment and service options. It can help you make decisions that support your recovery. If you are not used to working with providers in this way, you may have some questions and concerns.

This issue brief addresses these common questions about shared decision making.

- I'm not used to making decisions about treatment and services. Where do I start?
- What is my role in shared decision making? What is the provider's role?
- How can I improve communication with a provider?
- How can tools help with shared decision making?
- Where can I learn more about shared decision making?

People make decisions every day about their lives, relationships, health care, and services. Some of these decisions are easy to make, but others are more difficult. Shared decision making is a way for you to get involved in making important decisions about your treatment and services. It can help you talk with service providers about what is important to you. The word “shared” means that you and a provider share information and consider options, but final decisions about treatment, services, and supports are yours to make.

The Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) supports the use of shared decision making as a routine part of mental health services. This brief is designed to help people who use mental health services actively participate in decisions about their treatment and service options.



Shared Decision Making
in Mental Health





Where Do I Start?

The most important thing to remember is that you already make decisions. Some decisions, like what clothes to wear in the morning, may be easy. Others, such as whether to live with a roommate or on your own, may be more difficult. For many decisions there is no single “right” answer. There are many choices and each may have pluses and minuses about them. These types of decisions are very common in mental health. They are sometimes called “preference-sensitive” decisions. This means that your own preferences are the most important factor in making a choice that is right for you.

You may have been told that you are not capable of making your own decisions, but this is not true. Remember that you have a legal right to make decisions about your treatment and services, unless a court has determined otherwise. As you become more comfortable with the idea and skills of decision making, you may find it easier to speak up for yourself.

In some situations you may want to make a decision on your own. But other times you may want ideas or help from someone else. Sometimes, you may even want someone else to make the decision for you. In some cultures and families, important decisions are shared with family or close friends. The important thing to remember is that the choice of how to participate in decision making is yours to make.

When I have to make a decision and I need help to make it, I try to write things down. Then I can ask the appropriate questions to get the answers that I need.

— Pam, a person who uses mental health services

Here are some ways to start a conversation about decision making with a provider, family member, or friend. You do not have to use these exact words:

- I have an important choice to make. I want your help in thinking about what to do, but I want to be the one who makes the final decision.
 - I know that I have some problems in my life but I can still make good decisions about what is right for me. I would like your support in making a difficult decision.
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What is My Role?

Shared decision making is about respecting the special knowledge you have and recognizing the information that mental health providers have. Mental health providers understand treatment and service options. They have an important responsibility to make sure that you have all the details about the pluses and minuses of various options. They can support you in making important decisions.

Your role is equally important. You are the expert on your own experiences, life history, preferences, values, and cultural beliefs. You know what has worked or not worked for you in the past. The more a provider understands about you, the better able the two of you will be to develop a recovery plan that meets your needs. It is especially important that a provider knows what you do that supports your recovery. Perhaps you like to meditate, visit friends, or read. Any treatment or service you select should support rather than disrupt these activities.

How Can I Improve Communication with a Provider?

An important part of shared decision making is giving and receiving information.

- **TELL** providers what is most important to you. You may want to make a list before you meet. Write down what concerns you have and what you would like to work on. For example, you could say, *“I need to make sure any medication I use does not make me sleepy. I need to be alert on my job. What options do I have?”*
- **LISTEN** to what the provider has to say. He or she will have ideas or information that may help you.
- **ASK** for explanations or more information. Be certain you understand what is being recommended. Ask questions until you are clear about what you have heard.
- **REMEMBER** what was said. Some people find it helpful to write down what the provider says, or to make a recording. Other people like having someone with them when they talk to a provider.
- **TALK** with the provider about where you agree and where you disagree. See if you can find options that fit your preferences and meet the goals of the recovery plan you and the provider have developed.

Here are some examples of questions to ask about treatment and services. If you do not understand a provider’s response, keep asking questions until you do understand.

About Medications

- Why are you recommending this medication?
- How will I know if it is working for me? How long will it take?
- What are risks and possible side effects of this medication?
- What should I do if I experience these side effects?
- What should I do if I do not like this medication?
- What other options might be helpful?

About Services

- How will this service help me? What are my responsibilities?
- What outcomes can I expect from this service? How will I know it is helping?
- How often will I need to attend? For how long?
- What does this service cost? What is my responsibility for paying this cost?
- What should I do if I do not like this service?

Providers have the book knowledge. I have knowledge about my experiences and I bring that to the table.

– Sonny, a person who uses mental health services

TIP

After you have made your decision, you may need to tell others about it. Some of these people may not agree with the decision you made. This can be stressful if your decision goes against what is important to your family or community. You do not need to defend your decision, but it can be helpful to explain how you arrived at it. You might say, *“I would like to share with you a difficult decision I made. Your support is important to me, even if you disagree with what I decided to do.”* What is important is that you weighed your options and made the decision that you believe is best for you.



How Can Tools Help with Shared Decision Making?

In addition to the tips on page 3, tools can help improve communication between you and a provider. There are two types of tools that can be used for shared decision making. One is called a **decision aid**. A decision aid provides information about health conditions, treatment options, and outcomes. It can help you clarify your personal values and goals. Some decision aids can be filled out on paper. Others can be completed on a computer.

SAMHSA has created a decision aid that allows you to compare antipsychotic medications used to treat mental health conditions. It also lets you consider the use of other kinds of services and supports that can aid in your recovery. These include such things as massage, yoga, and peer support. The decision aid also features videos of people talking about their experiences with shared decision making. You can complete it on your computer or print a paper copy. You can find these materials at <http://store.samhsa.gov>. If you do not have access to a computer, you can ask someone who does to print the decision aid or order a free DVD for you. The DVD includes all of the resources that are on the Web site.

Decision support materials are another kind of tool for shared decision making. Decision support materials can help you learn how to communicate with providers. They also can help you think about options and make good decisions.

SAMHSA has a step-by-step decision support workbook called *What Is Right for Me? Making Important Decisions in Everyday Life*. You can use it any time you face a decision that is difficult to make. If you help others make decisions, you may also be interested in the companion workbook called *Supporting Choice: Helping Others Make Important Decisions*. Both are available at the Web site above.

Where Can I Learn More about Shared Decision Making?

Information about shared decision making, mental health treatment, and recovery:
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, <http://store.samhsa.gov>.

An interactive decision aid, general decision support workbook, and a companion tip sheet for people who use mental health services: <http://store.samhsa.gov>.

General information about non-medical approaches in health care:
The National Center on Complementary and Alternative Medicine, <http://nccam.nih.gov>.

This publication may be downloaded or ordered at <http://store.samhsa.gov>. Or, please call SAMHSA at 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727) (English and Español).

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