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Understanding and Managing Resistance: A Guide for Case Managers

By Mark Naghsh, LMSW, CMC

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of clinical settings, case managers are pivotal in navigating complex challenges, notably resistance to patient treatment. Resistance, characterized by patient behaviors that impede therapeutic interventions, represents a significant barrier to effective treatment and case management outcomes. It can manifest as overt noncompliance, subtle avoidance, or passive behaviors that disrupt the therapeutic process. This resistance hinders patient progress and complicates the responsibilities of case managers, who must employ a nuanced understanding of human behavior and therapeutic techniques.

Therefore, understanding and managing resistance is critical for enhancing therapeutic efficacy and achieving successful treatment outcomes. This educational article aims to equip case managers with a robust understanding of the various forms of resistance, their underlying causes, and the practical strategies for overcoming them. Through a comprehensive exploration of theoretical insights and integration of practical examples, this article will facilitate more effective interventions by case managers in their clinical practice.

The significance of addressing resistance is underscored by a wealth of psychological research and theoretical models that provide a framework for understanding this complex phenomenon. For instance, the Stages of Change Model developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) outlines different readiness levels for change, which can help case managers identify and address specific forms of resistance. Additionally, psychodynamic theories offer insights into how unconscious defense mechanisms may play a role in a patient's resistance to change (Freud, 1923), while cognitive-behavioral approaches focus on the influence of maladaptive beliefs and behaviors that need to be addressed (Beck, 1979).

Moreover, empirical studies have highlighted the impact of effective resistance management on treatment outcomes. For example, research has demonstrated that understanding the root causes of resistance and applying tailored intervention strategies can significantly improve patient engagement and compliance (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). These studies suggest that case managers skilled in identifying and mitigating resistance are better positioned to support their patients' journeys toward recovery and well-being.

By delving into the various dimensions of resistance and offering actionable strategies to manage it, this article serves as a vital resource for case managers seeking to refine their skills and enhance their effectiveness in clinical settings. Integrating theory, evidence-based practices, and real-world applications aims to foster a deeper understanding and more adept management of resistance, paving the way for improved clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction.

Understanding Resistance

Resistance to treatment can manifest in several forms, each presenting unique challenges for case management outcomes. Understanding the type of resistance a patient is experiencing can assist in identifying an applicable approach to improve outcomes and reduce friction points.

Superficial engagement: A patient may seem compliant—attending sessions and nodding in agreement—but fail to engage on a deeper, more meaningful level. For instance, a patient named John attends dialysis sessions but consistently diverts conversations away from discussing his feelings about his recent divorce and its impact on dietary compliance, a key issue in his situation. By understanding this type of

Mark Naghsh, LMSW, CMC, *specializes in complex chronic care, using core strengths of clients and family systems to improve care. He is the author of* The Human User Manual, *a book detailing psychodynamic theories that inform daily interactions, serving as a tool to teach empathy and compassion. An educator and NYSED-approved CEU provider, Mark supports the education of social workers and case managers. Additionally, he serves as a court evaluator with over 28 years of experience in guardianship planning. He is a board member for the Case Management Society of America and Aging Life Care Association, developing programs for the social work, case management, and nursing communities in NYC and beyond. He is currently president of Affinialcare Psychotherapy Services.*

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resistance, a case manager might use the alignment approach to assist the patient in understanding what they might be doing. An example to use here would be to compliment the patient for showing up for all their appointments but point out that they tend to move away each time the dietary topic is discussed. Exploring deeper into the feelings behind the behavior can assist the patient to see their feelings. Psychoeducation on the therapeutic dyad could also help here, which means explaining resistance as the avoidance of a complex topic.

Misleading information: Patients might provide inaccurate details about their feelings or situations. Consider a case in which a patient, Lisa, reports adherence to her medication regimen but, in reality, frequently skips doses, impacting her treatment outcomes. The case manager would want to look at Lisa's behavior versus what she shared with the clinician in this situation. Remain curious about why the medication is not working rather than ask the patient directly if they are taking it, which is likely to trigger more resistance. A possible question to ask might be, "I am really at a loss as to why this medication is not working; it works for all the other patients I see. What do you think might be happening?" Remaining curious or puzzled will remove the confrontational element and shift to a mutual goal to find the root cause of the lack of effectiveness.

Obstructing logistics: A patient might regularly arrive late or cancel appointments, disrupting the follow-up procedures. An example is Michael, who sets appointments during work hours and then cancels, citing unavoidable conflicts. Similarly, as above, the case manager must focus on the behavior while setting boundaries. In this situation, think about the varying elements that might be preventing him from showing and not progressing. What are the real reasons for his inconsistent attendance? Is his wife making him come in? Or does he not feel safe?

Communication styles: Resistance can also appear in how patients communicate, such as using excessive detail to avoid significant topics or giving minimal responses. Sarah, for example, talks at length about minor stresses at work so she can avoid discussing her anxiety disorder. In this situation, the case manager may want to look under the hood of what the patient is exhibiting, and say, "You seem to get agitated at work a lot for this is a topic you bring in weekly. Are there other situations that make you feel the same way?"

By working to recognize these forms of resistance, clinicians can tailor their approach to each patient's type of resistance. Although remaining curious, focusing on the behavior, and listening with intent are essential in moving past these types of resistance, the case manager must also be mindful of their own reactions and interactions with their patients in a clinical setting.

Theoretical Perspectives on Resistance

Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of resistance can also enhance a case manager's ability to address it effectively.

Stages of Change Model: Developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), this model suggests that resistance may indicate a patient's stage of readiness for change. It breaks it down into stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. A patient in the contemplation stage might acknowledge the need for change but feel ambivalent about acting on it, thus showing resistance through procrastination or skepticism about the benefits of treatment. They may not see it as a problem in the precontemplative stage yet. What we might see as resistance could be them not being aware it is a problem.

Psychodynamic theories: From this perspective, resistance might stem from unconscious defense mechanisms protecting the individual from perceived threats linked to change. For instance, a patient might resist discussing traumatic experiences that are central to their psychological issues—one example, the session described here is with a patient who could not access his empathy for his partner, for he was hiding his fears of sadness around loss. Despite being faced with losing his partner, he still could not access them until the risk of loss was removed via individual sessions. The trigger was the potential loss of his wife, which made his resistance grow stronger and less communicative of his feelings. He ostensibly had created a protective ego that presented self-confidence, which masked his fear of loss and abandonment.

Cognitive-behavioral approaches: Here, resistance is often viewed as resulting from maladaptive beliefs. For example, patients may resist engaging in cognitive-behavioral therapy exercises because they believe that their problems

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are unsolvable. This thought is what would be considered a recurring thought or cognitive distortion. In this case, reality testing can be beneficial. One could remind them that everything worked out fine every time they had the same procedure in the past. Alternatively, challenge the distortion by asking if there was a negative outcome they had experienced. This approach could help them discuss the fear more openly.

Comprehensive Causes of Resistance

Resistance can arise from a variety of sources, which may include:

Emotional Barriers

Emotional barriers are often rooted in a patient's fear of the unknown or a reluctance to confront harrowing emotions. For example, a patient, Emma, may resist discussing her history of abuse during treatment due to the intense discomfort and emotional pain these memories evoke. Her fear of revisiting traumatic memories manifests as avoidance behaviors—she may change the subject or become visibly distressed when nearing sensitive topics. Addressing these emotional barriers requires a sensitive approach, in which the clinician gradually helps Emma build resilience and comfort through techniques like grounding and controlled exposure.

Cognitive Barriers

Cognitive barriers arise when there is a lack of understanding or misconceptions about the therapy process or its benefits. A patient named Alex may doubt the efficacy of therapy because he does not understand how talking about his problems can improve his situation. He might think, "How can discussing my past change what is happening now?" Effective communication about the therapeutic process and the specific ways it can help is crucial to overcome such resistance. Educating Alex about cognitive restructuring and how altering thought patterns can change emotional responses and behaviors might reduce his skepticism.

Relational Barriers

Relational barriers often develop from mistrust in the therapeutic process or of the clinician. This resistance could be due to previous negative experiences with health care providers or general skepticism about mental health treatment. For instance, Maria, who had an unsupportive experience with a previous clinician, may enter a new therapeutic relationship with a defensive attitude, doubting the clinician's intentions. Building a solid therapeutic alliance is essential here and involves consistent, open communication and demonstrating empathy and nonjudgmental understanding. Over time, this approach can help Maria feel more secure and valued in the therapeutic relationship.

Motivational Barriers

Motivational barriers typically involve a lack of drive or energy, often exacerbated by mental health conditions like depression. John, suffering from severe depression, might find it overwhelming to engage in treatment or a treatment plan. He could perceive discussions about his future or making changes as futile, reflecting his depressive symptoms of hopelessness and low energy. In such cases, addressing the root of the motivational issues through pharmacologic treatment and motivational interviewing can be beneficial. These methods can help to incrementally increase John's engagement and willingness to participate in the process.

Contextual Barriers

Contextual barriers include external factors such as cultural stigma or family pressures that discourage seeking psychological help. Consider Priya, who comes from a cultural background in which mental health issues are stigmatized and seeking therapy is viewed as a sign of weakness. She might resist engaging in therapy for fear of being ostracized or judged by her community and family. Integrating culturally sensitive practices and possibly involving family members in the therapeutic process, when appropriate, can help overcome these barriers. Educating the patient and their family about the nature of mental health issues and the benefits of therapy can also reduce stigma and resistance.

Strategies for Managing Resistance

Effective strategies case managers can employ include:

Developing a therapeutic alliance: Building rapport and trust with patients and showing empathy and understanding can help reduce resistance. Consistently showing empathy towards a patient's concerns can gradually break down barriers of mistrust and fear. This process may appear

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complicated because our days are busy, and we need more time to do other tasks. It is understood that we need to be more efficient, so taking the time to build rapport seems counterintuitive. Being honest with a patient can go a long way. For instance, instead of showing frustration and anxiety when a patient is making things take longer, be honest with them and show your authentic self. You might tell the patient, "I understand that this is hard for you and want to help you understand this plan better, but unfortunately, I need to see another patient. Is there something I can do while I am away?" Although this may not stop the resistance, you are laying the groundwork for the next time you meet with them for you let them know they were important.

Patient-centered empathy: Actively listening and validating the patient's feelings without judgment encourages more open communication. Using the patient's vernacular or word choices typically helps them trust you more. In addition, you could respond to exactly what you heard and ask them if you were correct. This also lets them know you are listening to them and that what they are telling you is essential. This approach can increase the chances that they share more, for they know what they say matters to the clinician. Also, couples therapy techniques such as "I statements" can assist with a more therapeutic alliance. An example might be if you are frustrated, just letting your patient know that you are not frustrated with them, but that you get this way when you cannot help someone. An example statement might be, "I am not upset with you, but I am frustrated right now, for I do this work because I want to help."

Collaborative goal setting: Involving patients in setting their own goals for therapy can increase their investment and reduce resistance. For example, you may be working with a patient to set small, manageable goals for improving social interactions if they suffer from social anxiety. Another term for this is *mutuality*. Creating joint goals goes a long way to making progress, for you each have a stake, and it takes all the burden off the patient.

Involving other professionals: Collaboration with psychiatrists, therapists, and other health care professionals can provide a comprehensive approach to addressing complex cases of resistance. In a previous setting, our team had interdisciplinary care plan meetings where everyone brought unique perspectives. This strategy can help create objectivity, for we are more likely to lose our perspective when we must do things alone.

Conclusion

Effective resistance management is a pivotal skill for case managers in clinical settings. Throughout this article, we have explored the multifaceted nature of resistance, delving into its various manifestations—from superficial engagement and misleading information to obstructive logistics and evasive communication styles. By integrating theoretical insights from the Stages of Change Model, psychodynamic theories, and cognitive-behavioral approaches, we have outlined a robust framework for understanding the deep-seated origins of resistance and its complex psychological underpinnings.

We have examined the comprehensive causes of resistance, identifying emotional, cognitive, relational, motivational, and contextual barriers. Each area presents unique challenges and opportunities for case managers to apply targeted strategies to foster engagement and facilitate therapeutic progress. Case managers can transform resistance from a stumbling block into a stepping-stone toward positive outcomes by employing methods such as developing a solid therapeutic alliance, practicing patient-centered empathy, setting collaborative goals, and involving other professionals.

This article presented practical strategies backed by empirical research and highlighted the importance of a compassionate, informed approach to case management. The examples and scenarios provided serve as a blueprint for case managers to enhance their practice and achieve better patient outcomes.

In closing, understanding and managing resistance is more than a clinical skill—it is an art that requires sensitivity, patience, and perseverance. As case managers continue to engage with this dynamic aspect of therapy, they must remain adaptable and informed by ongoing research and developments in the field. By viewing resistance not as a barrier but as an opportunity for growth and understanding, case managers can significantly contribute to the transformative impact on clinical outcomes, leading to more profound and lasting changes in the lives of those they serve. CE II

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