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# How to Quickly Develop a Therapeutic Alliance

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## Introduction

Regardless of what kind of treatment you choose for your patient, it's important to remind yourself of the key feature of any successful treatment—a good treatment alliance. Here are some of the tried-and-true basics.

- Sit down to speak with the patient, rather than standing up while you talk (relevant primarily with inpatient treatment settings where you are visiting patient rooms). This communicates that you are carving out time to understand the patient.
- Make eye contact with the patient while you talk, rather than spending the majority of your time looking through the medical record.
- Use empathetic statements during every visit.
  - “That sounds difficult.”
  - “I can understand why you’re struggling.”
  - “You’ve done a great job simply surviving your childhood.”
- Rather than starting the interview by asking about alcohol use, start by showing interest in the patient as a person.
  - “Before we get into why you were admitted here (or why you made this appointment), tell me a little about yourself.”
  - “How is your life? What do you do for a living? Where do you live?”
  - “Who’s important in your life? What are some of your goals? What kinds of things do you like to do for fun?”
- Be nonthreatening and nonjudgmental in your approach.
  - “Would you be comfortable telling me a little bit about your history of issues with alcohol? I understand you’ve had some struggles with that at times.”
- Try to understand positive aspects of the patient’s use. Don’t come across as the naïve clinician who ignores that people use alcohol because it makes them feel good. Don’t automatically assume there is a negative explanation for the patient’s use, such as irresponsibly wanting to get wasted. Acknowledge that people often use because it improves mood, relieves boredom, enhances their ability to socialize with others, or allows them to stick with a challenging or menial job.
  - “What is it that you like most about using alcohol? How does it help you deal with stuff in your life?”
- Confront the issue of stigma head-on. Is there a history of trauma? Is the underlying psychiatric disorder the key driver? Is there a chronic pain issue? Convey respect and explicitly battle stigma.
  - “I’ve worked in the addiction field long enough to know that stigma is a big deal for a lot of my patients.”
  - “I’m a human and you’re a human, and I want to understand your pain so I can help you.”