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# Establishing a Token Economy in a Psychiatric Unit

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**Introduction:** The Token Economy (TE) is a method that promotes positive behaviors in patients, such as taking medications, going to groups, or maintaining hygiene. They earn tokens for their desirable actions on the unit, which can later be exchanged for rewards or privileges. Token economies are sometimes used in inpatient psychiatric units, as well as in residential treatment programs.

## Benefits of a Token Economy

- Promotes Positive Behaviors: Especially effective for patients who do not respond well to simple praise or encouragement.
- Overcomes Resistance: If a patient is hesitant to engage in a certain therapeutic activity, the promise of tokens can motivate them.
- Empowerment: Encourages patients to have more of a sense of control and involvement in their treatment.

## Implementation Steps

### 1. Establish Target Behaviors

- Behaviors should be achievable and applicable for all patients. Examples include:
  - Going to groups
  - Taking prescribed medication.
  - Routine hygiene tasks, such as showering and brushing teeth

### 2. Create a System of Tokens

- Utilize a "Star Rewards Card" for each patient.
- Card is divided into 7 days, with various categories for each day (e.g., "Join group activity," "Brush teeth").
- When a patient completes a task corresponding to one of the categories, they get a token (e.g., star-shaped stamps provided by staff) on their cards.

### 3. Select Rewards

- Choose tangible rewards that don't replace any services or privileges to which patients are already entitled (for example, meals or fresh air breaks are basic patient rights and can't be held back as privileges to be rewarded).
- A mobile "store" offers a variety of reward items.
- Rewards range from hygiene items and notebooks to cosmetics, cozy wearables like beanies, and snacks.

### 4. Communication

- Clearly display rules and rewards of the TE system, including store hours.
- To ensure the program's smooth operation, all staff—from nurses to therapists—need to be on the same page. Everyone should understand the system's workings and objectives.
- Maintain consistent communication to ensure every patient feels fairly treated. For instance, if one patient receives a token for a specific behavior, another should receive the same for exhibiting that behavior.
- Align procedures with Patients' Rights policies by consulting with the local department of mental health.

### 5. Monitor and Adjust

- Collect feedback from patients and staff for continuous improvement.
- Modify reward offerings as necessary; for example, removing beanies during a lice outbreak.

## Handling Undesirable Behaviors

- **Time Out Mechanism:** If a patient's behavior is counter to the program's objectives, their card goes into "time out," halting their ability to earn tokens for that day. They can start fresh the next day, keeping the focus on encouraging improved behavior.
- **Clear Consequences:** Clearly outline what actions will result in a patient's card going into "time out." For instance, aggressive behavior, whether verbal or physical, could be a reason.
- **Positive Focus:** The goal isn't to punish, but to emphasize positive behavior. Therefore, even if a card is in "time out" for the day, the patient has a clean slate the next day.