

## *Become a Partner with Your Clinician to Improve Your Health*

### **What is health?**

You may think this is a simple question or even a silly one. Everyone knows that being healthy means not feeling sick or having a disease. Right? But health is more than this. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity [being weak or frail].”<sup>1</sup> This definition has not changed since it was written in 1948. Yet, it is not the way many people tend to think of health.



### **Who is a healthcare provider?**

You may have been taught to think of clinicians (doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants) as healthcare providers. Perhaps you learned that they provided health--by ordering tests, prescribing medicine, doing surgery. When we think about the WHO's definition of health, we can see the huge role we can take in our lives to stay healthy. You are the one who knows yourself best. You know when a part of your body does not feel right. You know your lifestyle habits (e.g., patterns of eating, drinking, sleeping, smoking, exercising). When paying attention, you know when you are angry, frightened, anxious, stressed. All these things can affect your health. So, your clinician (who may only see you one to two hours per year) is not your healthcare provider. You are your own healthcare provider. You can do a lot to keep yourself healthy.

### **How can I become a partner with my clinician?**

One way to improve health is to become partners with your clinician. Clinicians have the medical knowledge, and you have a wealth of information about yourself. Finding a way to share this information with each other can make for a very powerful team. If you do not already have a primary care clinician, find one with whom you feel comfortable. Continue to see this clinician over time, so that you get to know each other.

### **What information should I share with my clinician?**

- When seeing your clinician, be as clear as you can about the reason for your visit.
  - What questions do you want answered?
  - What concerns do you have about your health?
  
- If you have a symptom that concerns you, jot down details to share with your clinician.
  - When did the symptom start?
  - Do you have it all the time?
  - How much does it bother you?
  - What makes it better? What makes it worse?
  - If the symptom is pain, what does it feel like—burning, stabbing, aching? How bad is it when it is at its worst? How bad is it when it hurts the least?
  - How have you tried to relieve the symptom? List everything tried: medication, over-the-counter remedies, acupuncture, massage, rest, exercise, heat, cold, etc.

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### **What information should I share with my clinician? (Con't.)**

- Share any family medical history that could be related to your concern. (Has a family member dealt with a similar issue?)
- Be honest. If you have not taken medication as prescribed or done your physical therapy exercises as directed, do not hide the truth. Share your reasons. Your clinician may be able to help you adjust to the treatment or find a different solution that will work better for you.
- Tell your clinician about anything important going on in your life, even if s/he does not question you about it. Ask if your health concern could be related to the issue going on in your life. Your mind is part of your body. Something that adds emotional stress to your life can also show up as a physical ailment. You may be able to avoid expensive tests or medications with side effects by getting to the root cause of your symptoms.
  - Do you often feel over-whelmed by your responsibilities?
  - Are you having relationship problems or going through a divorce?
  - Are you worried about your child?
  - Are you having difficulty related to your work?
  - Are you unemployed or having financial problems?
  - Are you a caregiver for an elderly relative?
  - Has someone close to you died or have you had a different type of loss?



### **I sometimes hesitate to ask all my questions because my clinician is so busy.**

#### **What should I do in this case?**

Most clinicians do have full schedules. There are several ways you can handle this:

- Being organized, as described in the section above, will help you make the best use of the time together.
- Clinics schedule different length appointments depending on the reason for the appointment. If you know ahead of time that you have many concerns, ask for a longer appointment time.
- At your appointment, address your most pressing concerns first. Schedule another appointment if needed.

### **What else can I do to partner with my clinician?**

Do your part. Do not wait until you feel sick or have a symptom. Take an active role in your health care now.

- Schedule regular appointments for check-ups and screening tests.
- Take an honest look at your lifestyle habits (e.g., patterns of eating, drinking, sleeping, smoking, exercising). Choose a way to improve one or more of these habits. Set reasonable goals, so that you can be encouraged by your success. Most of us do not have perfect habits. Do the best you can. Keep trying!
- Consider filling out the Health Partnership Agreement and My Health Goals on pages 4 and 5 with your clinician.

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### **What if I need more help?**

Generally, your primary care clinician is the best place to start for your health concerns. That is the person who is likely to know you best and to have the most insight about you and your situation. But no one person or discipline can provide all the help you need for every health concern. You can think of your health as something needing the help of a team. Team members will have different training, knowledge, and skills. They can help in different ways. If you want or need more help than your clinician can provide, ask who else you could see. There is always another discipline or group with whom you can talk or work. You do not need to handle the situation alone. Who you contact will depend on the particular health issue with which you are dealing, your beliefs and interests. There is often more than one specialty or group that can help.

Some of your health team members may be located in your own primary care clinic—your “medical home.” Others may be in various locations in your community. The list below will give you an idea of the wide variety of resources available:

- Acupuncturist
- Chiropractor
- Clinician in another medical specialty
- Dietician/nutritionist
- Exercise physiologist or personal trainer
- Grief counselor
- Health coach
- Home health staff
- Hospice staff
- Marriage counselor
- Massage therapist/body worker
- Nurse
- Occupational or physical therapist
- Psychologist
- Religious or spiritual leader
- Self-help group (e.g., Chronic Disease Self-Management Program)
- Social worker
- Support group
- Yoga instructor

### **REFERENCES**

1. Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p.100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.

***The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your health.***

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**Notes:**

# HEALTH PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

I, \_\_\_\_\_, (patient) and I, \_\_\_\_\_, (clinician) agree to become health partners.

**Clinician:** My focus is your health. I need your help to succeed. We may only spend a few hours together each year. This will set the stage for how you can promote your health the rest of the time. I will guide you along the way, but all healing is really self-healing. Your lifestyle choices have the greatest effect on your health. The staff here in your “medical home” and I are here to walk the path with you, but it is your path.

As we develop a healing relationship, you and I will both gain insight into what you need to be healthy. It is vital to keep your parts working and to fix them as needed. It is also important to focus on you as a *whole person*. That means paying attention to emotions, thoughts, beliefs, culture, relationships—all the things that make you who you are. If you work toward the goals listed below, you will be sick less often, need fewer drugs and procedures, and have a better quality of life. I will help you work toward these goals. I will do my best to provide excellent care. I will tailor your care to your individual needs, and I will honor your own capacity to heal.

**Patient:** I will work to promote my health. I understand that a healthy lifestyle includes the following goals. I will do my best to practice these healthy lifestyle habits. I will work towards those that I am not doing now.

1. **Movement and/or exercise.** 30 minutes of movement or exercise most days of the week.
2. **A healthy diet.** Eating at least 7 servings (1 serving size ~ the size of the palm of your hand) of fresh fruits and vegetables daily. Organic and locally produced food is best. Eating multi-colored whole foods, limiting foods that are processed, high in sugar or have a long shelf-life.
3. **Sleep.** Healing and staying healthy by getting enough sleep each night, including short naps if needed.
4. **A healthy weight.** Maintaining a body weight that is healthy for me.
5. **Avoiding harmful substances.** Identifying a substance or habit that I use too much and would have trouble giving up (food, caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, anger)? Asking for help in letting them go.
6. **Healthy relationships.** Developing healthy connections to others (family, friends, people with similar interests). Caring for others and being cared for is good for me and my community.
7. **Managing stress.** Understanding that the body and mind are one. When one suffers, the other is also affected. Paying attention to where and how I feel stress in my body. Identifying paths to ease.
8. **Connecting with nature.** Understanding that the environment influences my health and it is important to help protect it. Being in nature is healing. Spending time exploring it.
9. **Finding meaning and purpose.** Defining spirituality for myself. Exploring what gives my life meaning and purpose. Helping it grow. Investing time and energy in it. Recognizing that being helpful and kind to others is also good for me. Volunteering and participating in charitable work.
10. **Maintaining balance.** Finding balance in my life by allowing time for myself as well as others, and for play in addition to work.

**Patient:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Clinician:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## MY HEALTH GOALS

Use this goal sheet along with the Health Partnership Agreement. All ten health goals are important. Choose **one or two** to especially focus on during the next few weeks or months. Set new goals as needed.

**#1**

I will work on the following health goal: \_\_\_\_\_

I will work on this goal over the next \_\_\_\_\_ (length of time, e.g. 6 weeks or 4 months)

What will you do? \_\_\_\_\_

How will you do it? (List details and steps you will do to accomplish your plan.)

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**#2**

I will work on the following health goal: \_\_\_\_\_

I will work on this goal over the next \_\_\_\_\_ (length of time, e.g. 6 weeks or 4 months)

What will you do? \_\_\_\_\_

How will you do it? (List details and steps you will do to accomplish your plan.)

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**Patient:** What help do you need from your medical team to accomplish this goal/these goals?

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**Clinician:** I will help by: \_\_\_\_\_

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***Patient:*** \_\_\_\_\_

***Clinician:*** \_\_\_\_\_

***Date:*** \_\_\_\_\_