

Telehealth Strategies for a Long COVID Patient

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Research Question

What is the best team-based approach to a patient with chronic illnesses or Long COVID? Is a patient-centered or a problem-focused approach to patient care more suitable for telehealth platforms?

Introduction or Objectives

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes to the field of medicine, such as the switch to online platforms to conduct meetings, consultations, and patient encounters. Telemedicine provided a convenient way for clinicians to prevent lapses in patient care, but they are not a perfect solution. Not only did health providers had to quickly learn how to navigate in this space, but they had to do so while learning how to best treat this illness. One challenging consequence of the illness to termed "long COVID", which is the persistence of symptoms for more than four weeks.

Our objective in our IPTI session was to formulate an approach to treating a long COVID patient over a telemedicine encounter as an interprofessional team. During this encounter we learned to overcome some of the disadvantages of telemedicine while learning the roles of different health professions.

Case Information

Amanda Berry-Mantel is a 39-year-old woman who presented for a Telehealth visit for Long COVID symptoms. Amanda was diagnosed with COVID in April 2021 and was hospitalized for 11 days, and is now experiencing excessive fatigue, migraine headaches, cough, brain fog, shortness of breath without exertion, hair loss, and loss of taste and smell. Amanda did not receive a COVID vaccine. Amanda is most concerned about how her symptoms are impacting her daily activities, family, and social life.

Osteopathic/Allopathic Student

Amanda's medical evaluation was performed by both allopathic and osteopathic medical students and focused on the following concepts:

- Monitoring established medical conditions:** We asked Amanda about her previous diagnoses of exercise-induced asthma, and hypertension. We counseled Amanda about the importance of daily blood pressure monitoring at home and using her inhaler as needed.
- Medications:** Current medications include Lisinopril 5mg by mouth once daily, Albuterol inhaler as needed, multivitamins once daily. We confirmed her medication consistency, and counseled her on the importance of being aware potential side effects. Changing medications from Tylenol
- We worked with the patient to create a medical treatment plan regarding her long COVID symptoms, which included pharmacologic treatment as well as education on diet, sleep hygiene, and breathing exercises.

Physician's Associate Student

The Physician's Associate (PA) student focused their assessment on Amanda's shortness of breath without exertion and other symptoms of anxiety by talking with the patient about:

- Meditation techniques:** The PA student suggested various meditation techniques for Amanda to practice when she is experiencing anxiety like symptoms.
- Deep breathing exercises:** The PA student demonstrated to Amanda how to perform deep breathing exercises for anxiety and panic attacks.

Social Worker Student

The social worker student focused their assessment on Amanda's lifestyle and activity goals by focusing on:

- Priorities:** The social worker worked with Amanda to help discover Amanda's priorities in life and what activities make her happy. Amanda shared her values of family and joy of gardening and how Amanda can make modifications to continue to participate in activities that she loves such as gardening, and cooking with her family.
- Activities of daily living:** The social worker student inquired about Amanda's daily activities and what her goals for her physical activity included.
- Peer/family support:** The social worker student worked with Amanda to learn more about her support system which include her partner, family, and friends. We also discussed the potential support of Long COVID Support Groups that can be found at local community centers and even on Facebook.

Occupational Therapy Student

The Occupational Therapy Student concentrated their assessment on how Amanda can maintain her meaningful activities and occupations.

- Strategies for conserving energy:** The occupational therapy student worked with Amanda about using blue light blocking glasses when using her phone/computer in order to decrease her migraine symptoms. When cooking dinner with her family, we suggested cooking meals where her children are able to take over most of the cooking responsibilities if safe and appropriate. We also discussed how Amanda can make gardening easier by using raised garden beds and having plants inside her home which she can care for easily through the day. We discussed the importance of finding a social and physical environment that is supportive of Amanda's symptoms and treatment plan.

Telehealth Strategies

Throughout this experience, we were able to practice and learn about various Telehealth strategies to make the patient experience both comfortable and beneficial. Some important Telehealth strategies that we learned and would suggest for all Telehealth visits:

- Ensuring patient safety:** It is important to verify that the patient is in a safe environment and able to speak open and honestly with the healthcare professional during their Telehealth visit. This includes verifying if there are any other people in the room during the visit, and ensuring that the patient feels comfortable speaking if there is another person present.
- Motivational interviewing:** This interviewing technique is a collaborative, goal oriented style of communication that empowers people to motivate themselves to change. This was particularly useful for our patient as she was very frustrated with her symptoms and had low confidence that anything could make her feel better. The core skills of motivational interviewing can be summarized by the mnemonic OARS
 - O**pen ended questions: Gives the patient the opportunity to tell their story.
 - A**ffirmation: The provider inspires confidence by congratulating the patient on their strengths and efforts.
 - R**eflection: Rephrasing or reflective statements demonstrate empathy and understanding to the patient.
 - S**ummarizing: Summarizing reinforces what has been said for the patient and ensures both parties are on the same page.

During our visit, we were met with several Telehealth challenges and were able to do our best to work with our team and the patient to resolve these issues. Some of the issues we can access included:
-Amanda noted that having the light on in her room and the brightness of the screen was exacerbating her migraine symptoms. To resolve this issue, we had the patient dim the lights in her room and lower the brightness on her computer which was able to help decrease her migraine symptoms.
-At one point during our session we could tell that Amanda was visibly frustrated that we were focusing on her health and medication history rather than her current symptoms. We apologized to the patient and explained our reasoning for doing so, but decided to turn our attention to her current problems and went back to her history if we had time.

Conclusion

This patient experience allowed us to learn about the most effective strategies to create a safe and beneficial environment during a Telehealth Visit for a Long COVID patient. We learned how to effectively establish rapport with a patient using motivational interviewing techniques. Our session allowed us to learn how communicate with each other and run our encounter efficiently.
It is vital to collaborate with a well rounded health care team to ensure that the patient is evaluated from various different areas using each healthcare professionals area of expertise. This not only benefits the patient tremendously but allows healthcare professionals to learn from each other. Our session allowed us to learn how communicate with each other and run telehealth encounters effectively.

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