

# Honoring Individual Preferences

## Shared Decision Making in Everyday Practice

Information for Mental Health Service Providers

*Creating Dialogue  
Promoting Choice  
Supporting Recovery*

*I have always felt that I was recovery oriented. I'm the kind of person who really listens to people and takes their ideas and concerns into consideration. But shared decision making takes it to a different level. It has changed how I think about people and about my practice.*

*— Tianna, mental health service provider*

### Am I Practicing Shared Decision Making?

*Collaborative communication is the hallmark of shared decision making, and you may feel that you already practice this way. The questions below will help you determine the extent to which you are involved in shared decision making.*

*This issue brief addresses these common questions about shared decision making:*

- Do I recognize and address “preference-sensitive” decisions?
- Do I support the person’s autonomy in decision making?
- Do I help the person explore options based on
  1. full, current, and objective information about his or her situation and
  2. his or her personal values, preferences, and goals for treatment?
- Do I help the person examine the benefits and risks of the options?
- Do I use tools to help the person think about options and arrive at a decision?
- Do I help the person revisit and revise the decision if need be?

Shared decision making helps people who use mental health services and providers improve communication about treatment and service options. It pairs full information and decision making tools with respectful two-way communication to help balance clinical information about mental health conditions and treatment options with an individual’s preferences, goals, and cultural values and beliefs.

Shared decision making is an emerging best practice in health care, and the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) supports the use of shared decision making as a routine part of mental health services. This issue brief for mental health providers is part of a set of materials designed to help make this possible.



Shared Decision Making  
*in Mental Health*





## Understand Preference-Sensitive Decisions

Preference-sensitive decisions are decisions in which there is no conclusive standard of care or there are multiple treatment options, each with pros and cons. For example, many psychiatric medications have similar efficacy profiles and complex risk-benefit tradeoffs. Only the individual can determine the relative importance of the risks and benefits in his or her life.

Most life decisions—including choice of living situation, employment, and decisions regarding the selection of services and medications—are preference-sensitive. Too often, decisions are made for people who use mental health services, rather than with and by them. You can be alert to day-to-day situations that can be reframed as opportunities for decision making and begin a discussion with the person you are helping by suggesting, **“This is a situation where you can think about what is most important to you and make a decision.”**

*It is time to take the high road and heed the ethical imperative upon which the practice of shared decision making rests: Autonomous adults have the right to determine what happens to their bodies and minds.*

*Robert E. Drake, M.D., Ph.D., and Patricia E. Deegan, Ph.D., Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center*

*Psychiatric Services, August 2009, Vol. 60 (8), p. 1007.*

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## Supporting Autonomy in Decision Making

Shared decision making supports personal autonomy and self-determination, which are at the core of health care decision making and are foundational values for people who use mental health services. People with mental health diagnoses have a legal right to make their own decisions, unless deemed otherwise by a court. To help them protect this right, you might suggest that consumers prepare a psychiatric advance directive, a legal document establishing a person's preferences for future treatment. Discussions about whether to prepare a psychiatric advance directive and what it should contain lend themselves well to a shared decision making process. For more information on psychiatric advanced directives, see <http://www.nrc-pad.org>.

You may find that a person's interest and ability to participate in decision making varies from decision to decision and from time to time. You can begin to explore his or her preferences by asking, **“Is this a decision you want to make yourself or do you want some help from me or from someone else?”** **“What type of help would you like?”** Cultural values and beliefs can affect whether the person prefers a more or less active role in decision making.

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## Generate Options

Shared decision making honors the expertise of both parties in the clinical encounter. The person using services is an expert on his or her life experiences, cultural values and beliefs, goals and preferences, and responses to past treatment and services. The provider has expertise on treatment, services, and medication options, as well as the possible risks and benefits of each. Together, you can explore how different choices may affect the person's life and recovery.

You can help people generate a list of options by suggesting, **“Let's make a list of all the possible ways to handle this situation.”** Generating a wide range of options, even ones that may not seem initially practical, provides an opportunity to think creatively and consider a variety of perspectives.

Many individuals find that complementary and alternative approaches—such as peer support, diet and exercise, massage, acupuncture, and meditation—are helpful to them in their recovery. Discussion of all possible options the person is considering will help you both develop a plan that he or she finds meaningful.

## TIP

Remember to consider watchful waiting as a possible choice. Watchful waiting is a proactive decision to take no further action at a particular point in time while closely observing the situation. Immediate action is not always the best choice.

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## Discuss Benefits and Risks

Some people may want or need help to think through the benefits and risks of each option in light of their preferences and values. There are a number of decisional balance scales and tables that can be useful. One of the simplest approaches is to list on a sheet of paper all of the options and then list the pros and cons of each option. To help people think of pros and cons, you can ask, “**What do you think will happen if you choose this option?**”

You may have a strong opinion about what the person should do, but it is important to help without taking over the process. You can say, “**Here is an idea you might consider,**” or “**Do you want to hear my thoughts on this?**” rather than, “**I think you should do this.**”

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## Use Decision Making Tools

Shared decision making is often facilitated by the use of tools, known as decision aids and decision support resources. You can make use of existing tools or adapt or create tools for a particular type of decision, a unique situation, or a person’s needs and abilities.

You can introduce the use of a tool by suggesting, “**Here is a step-by-step worksheet to help you think about this.**” Individuals can complete these tools by themselves, with your help, or with the aid of a family member, friend, peer, or other trusted advisor.

### *Decision Aids*

**Decision aids** are structured tools that help people become involved in health care decisions by providing information about specific health conditions, treatment options, and outcomes and by clarifying personal values related to the decision. They come in a variety of formats, from simple paper-and-pencil instruments to audio-guided workbooks, interactive videos and CD-ROMs, and computer-assisted and web-based tools. A decision aid supplements rather than replaces information and services provided by health care providers.

There are literally hundreds of decision aids in general health, but few are available to date for use in mental health. Fewer still deal with serious psychiatric conditions. SAMHSA has created an interactive decision aid to help fill this gap. It allows individuals to compare different antipsychotic medications and to consider the use of alternative approaches and wellness activities as part of an overall recovery plan. This interactive PDF is available at no cost at <http://store.samhsa.gov>.



## Decision Support Resources

These are less formal tools and supports to help individuals and providers learn more about various treatment and service options and to foster communication skills. SAMHSA has developed two general decision support resources that may be useful when no topic-specific decision aid exists. These workbooks are titled *What Is Right for Me? Making Important Decisions in Everyday Life* and *Supporting Choice: Helping Someone Make an Important Decision*. They can also be found at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/consumersurvivor>. The first workbook is designed for an individual to use independently, while the second can be used by providers, peer supporters, family members, and others to help anyone make an important decision.

## Making Decisions

The ultimate goal of the shared decision making process is to help a person arrive at a decision with which he or she is comfortable. Research and practice have shown that individuals who choose the treatment or services they believe will work best for them experience greater satisfaction with the decision and more confidence in their health care providers. They are more likely to follow through with the decision and may experience better mental health outcomes.

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## Revisit a Decision

Many decisions are made more than once—for example, where to live, what kind of job to get, or selecting an approach to address a problem. Therefore, there are times when an individual will need to revisit a decision and think it through again. You can check on decisions already made by asking, “**You made a decision to do X. How did that go for you?**” It is important to remind people that a decision that did not work out as expected does not mean they failed; revisiting and revising decisions are part of the process of good decision making.

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## Where Can I Learn More about Shared Decision Making?

**Information about shared decision making, mental health treatment, and recovery:** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, <http://store.samhsa.gov>

**Toolkits for developing and implementing decision aids in clinical practice, and education and training in decision making skills, including a free online tutorial:** Ottawa Health Research Institute, <http://decisionaid.ohri.ca>

**A decision aid library and general health care decision guide: Shared Decision Making, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center,** [http://dhmc.org/shared\\_decision\\_making.cfm](http://dhmc.org/shared_decision_making.cfm)

**General information about non-medical approaches in health care:**  
The National Center on Complementary and Alternative Medicine, <http://nccam.nih.gov>

This publication may be downloaded or ordered at <http://store.samhsa.gov>. Or, please call SAMHSA at 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727) (English and Español).

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