

CONDUCTING A PATIENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

As the healthcare field approaches a threshold for cost savings, there is more of a focus on quality-based competition. Physicians and other providers are increasingly being held accountable via performance assessments, of which patient satisfaction surveys are a part. While many psychiatrists challenge the accuracy of these surveys since they often see acutely ill patients, a portion of whom may 1.) have considerable negative transference; 2.) be in treatment involuntarily; or 3.) be too ill to respond to such surveys; managed care and other healthcare organizations continue to use patient satisfaction surveys as part of their efforts to improve the quality of mental health services.

Large group practices with managed care contracts can benefit from high performance scores on satisfaction surveys. The results of the surveys can be used to market the practice to providers and patients, and to negotiate entry to new provider panels.

Administering your own patient satisfaction surveys (see Appendix S for a sample survey) can also help you attune your practice to the needs and opinions of your patients. The best results on self-administered satisfaction surveys can be obtained by following these recommendations:

1. Use a written, anonymous, one-page survey with graded responses that can be computerized and analyzed quantitatively.
2. Distribute the surveys randomly; for example, at the end of five visits to every third patient. The survey can be mailed to the patient's home with a friendly letter and a self-addressed, prepaid envelope. This would be especially appropriate for patients who are too busy to complete the survey in your office. However, be careful of compromising confidentiality when sending survey information to patients' homes. Also, do not send mail-back surveys with bills. This could confuse your patients' feelings about the practice with their feelings about financial payments. Some psychiatrists solicit feedback from patients on the telephone, but this could take the time away from your practice. If you are going to use more than one survey method, be sure that the different methods are used simultaneously to get a fair representation of your patients. You might also want to send surveys to referring physicians to find out what the patients they referred have to say about your practice.
3. You can include the following elements in your patient satisfaction survey to help your patients rate you, your practice, and your staff:
 - Physician's professional manner
 - Physician's knowledge
 - Physician's ability to explain and communicate

- Physician's understanding of the patient's problems and feelings
 - Perceived benefit from treatment
 - Staff courteousness, friendliness, helpfulness, and efficiency
 - Practice hours
 - Accuracy of billing and payment
 - Convenience of payment policy
 - Comfort and cleanliness of office
 - Adequacy of parking
 - Waiting time in the office for an appointment
 - Fees
 - Patient's age
 - Number of times the patient has referred others to the practice
 - Number of months or years the patient has been treated in this practice
 - Likelihood of patient referring others to this practice in the future
4. Have the survey returned to a location other than the office and have someone other than staff analyze the results to ensure objectivity.
 5. Develop an internal report that addresses both positive and negative comments. Focus on the complaints presented by more than one patient and develop a strategy to address them.
 6. Distribute the results of the survey to your patients along with concrete examples of how you plan to address the problems they identified. For example, "Several patients have indicated that they sometimes have difficulty getting through to the office, so we are installing additional telephone lines." By addressing negative responses in this manner you can build confidence in your professionalism and commitment to high-quality service.
 7. Get the most mileage from a positive report. You can send it to third-party payers, MCOs, primary care physicians, and even to your local media. This will lend credibility to your practice and is an excellent marketing tool.
 8. Allocate part of your marketing budget for patient satisfaction surveys and be sure to allocate resources for developing, copying, and distributing the survey, as well as for analyzing the survey's results.