

A CLL EMPOWERMENT GUIDE

Establishing
a therapeutic
relationship &
building rapport

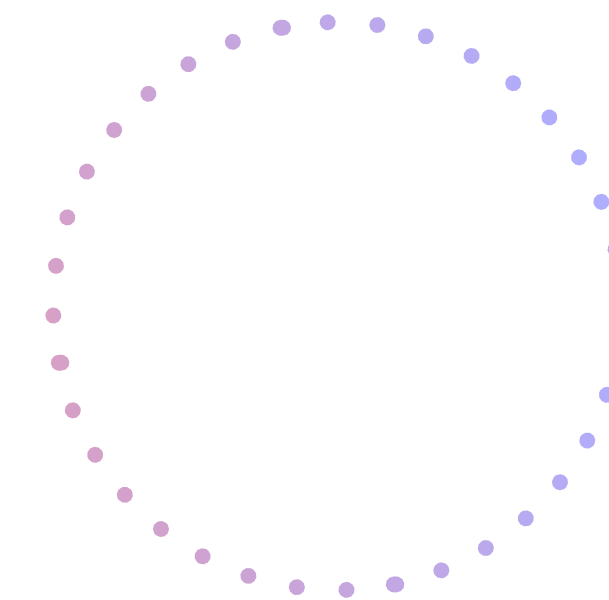


As a chronic disease, chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) can create various difficulties for the people affected.

Depending on the stage of the disease, different challenges may arise.

For example, during the "Watch & wait" phase, some patients may be anxious, because they feel like they have a significant health problem and "nothing is being done about it".

Moreover, when patients need to start treatment, they might face uncertainty about the future: their everyday functioning, their ability to work, or any side effects they might experience from their treatment. Relapse could also lead some patients to face new ambiguities and worries.



In dealing with the above difficulties, the relationship the patient has with their physician can greatly help them. Indeed, it has been observed that a strong therapeutic alliance between people with cancer and their physician is associated with positive outcomes, including better management of side effects, increased adherence, decreased anxiety and depression, as well as improved quality of life.

The therapeutic relationship is a special form of relationship and a major part of care delivery. Moreover, it refers to the interpersonal space, where a professional and a patient aim to interact with each other, in order to produce beneficial changes for the patient.



In other words, it is a purposeful, goal-directed relationship for the best interest and best possible outcome for the patient.



BUT HOW CAN A GOOD THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP BE ESTABLISHED?

The foundations of the Therapeutic Relationship are laid down during the first appointment, the so-called orientation phase. During this phase, a calm, inviting and open stance on behalf of the physician, can facilitate communication and promote a better relationship. Being overly distant or didactic is discouraged, as it can create early ruptures.

In addition, clarifying the purpose and nature of the relationship early on can help establish trust. **Especially in CLL, this is of great importance, as in many cases the patient is faced with a paradox: while they have cancer, they usually do not need to receive any treatment straight away.**

The trust that the healthcare professional will inspire in patients, will help them alleviate their anxiety. Especially in chronic conditions such as CLL, a "contract" is formed between the healthcare professional and the patient, although not formal or written, which explains the roles of the people involved and the goals of the relationship.

Overall, achieving a good therapeutic relationship requires the inclusion of certain qualities and actions.





To begin with, **respect** is one of these qualities. Specifically, patients must be motivated to talk openly and honestly about their concerns, fears, expectations, and preferences. This can only happen if the person feels comfortable with the healthcare professional, who respects their individuality and diversity.

Empathy is another quality that the healthcare professional is required to have, in order to establish a good Therapeutic Relationship. Expressing empathy can include naming emotions (e.g. you seem stressed, I can see this has angered you), validating patients' emotional experiences (e.g. I can see why you feel this way) and encouraging them to express these emotions (e.g. Tell me more about this).

Lastly, **active listening** is vital to the foundation of a therapeutic relationship and can be improved by the following practices.

For instance, showing care about the patient and interest in what they have to say can be facilitated by retaining eye contact, being nonverbally attentive, and talking about topics raised by the patient. Other behaviours may require more explaining disease processes in everyday language.



Along the CLL journey, the healthcare professional and the patient work together to recognize health problems, as well as set goals and suitable interventions within the care plan. A good **therapeutic relationship** empowers the patient and healthcare team to work together and helps patients regain control of their health status.

Having established a good therapeutic relationship does not mean that communication errors and misinterpretations will be entirely absent. These are a normal part of any relationship and are even more likely in medical settings, due to the cognitive complexity and emotional intensity that characterize them. The crucial skills for clinicians include being able to identify them and make the appropriate conversational repairs.

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