

A Quick Reference Guide for Health Care Professionals

The Concordant Care approach is a patient-centered communication model to help patients and clinicians build mutual trust and collaborate effectively when addressing health concerns where there is uncertainty. There is often uncertainty around diagnosing and addressing exposure-related health concerns, particularly when these concerns include medically unexplained symptoms. This uncertainty is embedded within a historical context that the government and medical establishment have not always effectively addressed military environmental exposures, which can increase feelings of betrayal and distrust among Veterans. The Concordant Care model provides guidance on how to address Veteran's exposure concerns and build trust around exposure-informed care.

Concordant care consists of three actionable components: validate the Veteran's experiences, develop a shared understanding of the Veteran's current health and exposure history, and co-create an action plan.



1. VALIDATE EXPERIENCES

Use reflective statements to recognize the Veteran's concerns, beliefs, and experiences. Whenever possible, it is helpful to use the Veteran's language.

VALIDATION OF EXPOSURE CONCERNS

State that you are here to support the Veteran and acknowledge the Veteran's concerns about the impact of military environmental exposures on their health and wellbeing.

"It's understandable that you would be concerned about how your exposures in the military, like sandstorms and oil well fires, may impact your health in the future."

"It sounds like you are concerned that your exposure to depleted uranium has contributed to your chronic pain and recent diagnoses."

VALIDATION OF EMOTIONS

Acknowledge and normalize the Veteran's emotional experiences managing their military environmental exposure concerns. Common emotional experiences include frustration, anxiety, fear, and hopelessness.

"That must be anxiety-provoking to not have definitive answers about how this exposure could impact you in the future."

"I hear you say you feel like you have tried everything, but nothing seems to be working. That must be extremely frustrating."

2. DEVELOP A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

A process in which the Veteran and clinician hear each other's beliefs about the Veteran's exposures, exposure-related health concerns, and treatment goals, and acknowledge them with mutual respect.

GATHER INFORMATION

Ask questions to better understand Veterans' experiences and beliefs about their condition.

- Elicit illness beliefs about past exposures and current symptom(s)

"You mentioned you were concerned about your exposure to depleted uranium. Tell me more about your concerns."

- Assess impact of current symptom(s)

"How have your symptoms impacted your day-to-day life?"

- Understand treatment experiences/preferences

"What has/has not worked in the past?"

SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- Correct misinformation if needed.

"So far, research finds exposure to depleted uranium is not linked to the types of symptoms that you're having. However, we know that exposures common to the Gulf can be precipitating factors for symptoms such as chronic pain."

- Share your understanding of their exposure-related concerns, including any information you have on the Veteran's specific exposure of concern, or current symptoms or diagnoses. Consider using the 3 P Framework. The 3 P's are:

Predisposing factors:

Biopsychosocial risk factors for developing a condition (e.g., family or genetic factors)

Precipitating factors:

Factors that trigger the onset of the condition (e.g., exposure to a toxin)

Perpetuating factors:

Factors that maintain, prolong, or exacerbate the condition. These are often the targets of treatment (e.g., unhelpful illness beliefs, behavioral responses to symptoms, or physiological mechanisms)

"A helpful way to understand your symptoms is by thinking about predisposing, precipitating, and perpetuating factors. It sounds like we agree that your deployment has impacted your health and played a role in precipitating your current symptoms. I'd like to talk a little more about any predisposing factors that may be specific to you and come up with a plan to address your symptoms, including how we can identify and target perpetuating factors."

NEGOTIATE & COLLABORATE

- You don't have to agree on everything.
- Acknowledge and integrate the Veterans' beliefs, emotions, and goals, and highlight areas of shared understanding. This could include a shared understanding of the cause of the Veteran's symptoms, but also the nature of the symptoms, the impact of the symptoms, or the treatment plan.

"I hear that you have been continuing to worry about your exposure to depleted uranium and how it may have caused your symptoms. While we do not yet know the exact cause of symptoms after deployment to the Gulf, we do know that symptoms like yours are common. And it sounds like we agree that your symptoms are real, physical in nature, greatly impact your life, and that it's important that we work together to address them."

3. CO-CREATE AN ACTION PLAN

A collaborative process to generate a plan for addressing the Veteran's exposure concerns and managing any current conditions and perpetuating factors.

- Identify and develop a shared understanding of the perpetuating factors that are maintaining the Veteran's health conditions. Examples include: smoking, poor diet, low physical activity, mental health concerns, negative thinking, and physiological mechanisms.

"While deployment to the Gulf precipitated your symptoms, we know that pain can lead to lower physical activity levels and cause deconditioning, which actually makes pain worse."

- Individualize the process and integrate the Veteran's values, preferences, and goals.

"I hear you saying that it's important to you to be able to maintain physical functioning so that you can continue working and managing your home."

- Share your recommendations for long-term management of concerns.

"I'd like to recommend a graded exercise plan to help with managing your chronic pain and your goal of maintaining physical functioning. How does that sound?"

- Follow up with the Veteran and monitor symptoms and remind them that care can be a trial-and-error process.

"It seems like the current graded exercise plan did not work well. Let's talk about ways we can tweak the plan, as well as some other treatment options. We will keep working at this to find something that works for you."

These strategies can help you co-create an action plan:

- Identify Veterans' values.
- Set SMART [Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound] goals.
- Follow any relevant clinical practice guidelines (CPG) to treat the Veteran's symptoms/health conditions. Find VA/DoD CPGs: www.healthquality.va.gov/.
- Encourage self-management.
- Advocate on Veterans' behalf.
- Facilitate referrals and close the loop with other specialties.
- Incorporate Whole Health principles. To learn more, visit: www.va.gov/wholehealth/.

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