Overcoming Stigma and Mistrust in Mental Health Care:

Five Tips for Talking to Patients of Color About Genetic Testing

While the stigma of mental illness transcends race and culture, its effects may be most prevalent among People of Color (POC). “Minority groups, including African Americans, are often the least likely to seek mental health care, due to cultural norms as well as socioeconomic factors” says Pediatric Nurse Practitioner Sarah Yao. The history of health care injustices in the United States and personal experiences with racism have also reinforced the belief that the medical and research communities are not trustworthy. This lack of trust is a significant barrier to POC participating in genetic testing. To build trust, encourage participation, and take meaningful steps toward destigmatizing mental health care, providers must be aware of the factors that contribute to this skepticism.

These tips may help you navigate complex conversations about genetic testing. You’ll also hear from clinicians of color who use the GeneSight test.

1 Seek first to understand

Factors that may prevent POC from seeking or accessing mental health care include cultural norms and stigma, economic status, lifestyle factors, and a lack of reliable transportation and housing. Racial and ethnic discrimination have played a role in systematically denying some individuals access to education and resources that can help them make informed health care decisions.

Bad experiences in the past can also be a deterrent. Keeping in mind that simply coming in for a mental health care visit may be a significant leap of faith for many POC can help you begin the process of building trust.

2 Engage in active listening

This is a highly important skill for building trust and combatting skepticism, especially in mental health care and even more so for POC, who may fear they won’t be listened to or taken seriously due to the biases of the provider. You must ensure that patients are feeling heard and understood.

> *“Managing the expectations from a place of understanding and offering a safe space for someone to share the symptoms they may be struggling with is important, but the key is following up and active listening.”*
>
> \> **Dr. Whitnee Brown, DNP, FNP-C, PMHNP-BC, Alabama**

3 Focus on communication

The inability to communicate effectively can negatively impact a patient’s bond with a clinician. Failing to acknowledge or dismissing what a patient is feeling may confirm their fears and make it difficult to cultivate a productive relationship moving forward.

It’s important to initiate and maintain an open, honest dialogue with the patient, and when you’re ready to broach the subject of genetic testing and begin those conversations, you’ve already established a level of comfort and trust in each other.

4 Build trust through objectivity with GeneSight

Being able to point to objective data, like information provided by the GeneSight test, can further aid the trust-building process with patients who are wary of unconscious bias. Knowing the treatment plan is informed by the patient's own genetic makeup can make them feel more comfortable.

> *"With the objective data you can acquire through the GeneSight testing, I can imagine someone using that data to make a clinical choice in place of them using their own subjective perspectives."*
>
> \> **Dr. Johnny Williamson, Psychiatrist, Illinois**

Providers can also cite the positive results from recent research. Black and Hispanic patients were the focus of a post-hoc analysis of the GUIDED Study, which reviewed the impact of the GeneSight test on depressive treatment outcomes compared to treatment as usual (TAU). The analysis found that patients whose clinicians' treatment decisions could be informed by the GeneSight Psychotropic test showed improvements in clinical outcomes — regardless of self-reported race or ethnicity.[1] While these results are promising, future studies with larger sample sizes and more diverse patient populations are still needed.

5 Emphasize GeneSight's transparency and privacy policy

Reinforcing GeneSight's commitment to privacy can help encourage patient participation. All tests are processed at GeneSight's own accredited lab to ensure the quality and security of patient test results. Samples are destroyed within 60 days of receipt, and patient data is never sold to other companies. Genetic information is private and protected through various state and federal laws, including HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and GINA (Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act).

Myriad also makes cost simple to understand and offers financial assistance for eligible patients, to help ensure that cost is not a barrier to GeneSight testing.

> *"Taking the time to educate patients about the importance of their mental well-being and offering them the ability to utilize GeneSight for better precision medication selection has far-reaching effects."*
>
> \> **Sarah Yao, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner, DNP, APRN, Nevada**

Scan the QR code to become a registered GeneSight clinician.

For more information about barriers to mental health care, the history behind Black skepticism of mental health care, and many other educational topics for health care providers, visit our blog.

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[1] Mabey, B, et al. The Impact of Combinatorial Pharmacogenomic Testing on Outcomes in Black and Hispanic Patients. Poster session presented at American Psychiatric Association Annual Meeting; May 2022; New Orleans, LA.

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