Top 10 Tips for Pharmacists
#Here4MentalHealth

1. Be mindful of the patients you are serving.
As a pharmacist your job requires diligence, focus and meticulous attention to detail. That being said, we understand sometimes you can get so focused on the task at hand that you forget to keep an eye to what your patients want and need from you.
From our focus groups we heard:
“I always see the pharmacist busy in the back. They don’t even look up. I don’t think they would have time to talk to me or for me to ask questions, more than just telling me a few things about side effects and handing me my pills.”
This is just one example of a common sentiment around patients feeling invisible at the pharmacy. Take time to notice them, especially if you know they might be suffering from a mental health condition. Ask how they are doing, if they have additional questions.

2. Don’t let yourself forget—it’s an illness.
Patients (and their loved ones) often need further education about their illness. Informing them that the condition they are suffering from is a medical condition and deserves treatment is often an important message. We heard from patients that many people fight with the idea of taking medications, even if they know it will help them. Help individuals overcome this by talking candidly about benefits and potential adverse effects, and tailor it to their individual situation. You can use the Whole Health Medication Tracking Tool to assist you in this.

3. Offer privacy
Mental health is a sensitive subject. When we spoke to our focus group participants, most indicated they would like the pharmacist to at least offer the ability for a more private conversation. Here are some suggestions of how to do this in practice:
- Post signage indicating privacy is a priority at your pharmacy.
- Before initiating counselling, offer to talk privately in the counselling room.
- An alternative to the counselling room if that is not available is to follow-up with the patient by phone.
- If the patient’s needs are more complex and time does not permit an in-depth conversation, schedule an appointment at a time that suits both of you to talk further. This could be in person at the pharmacy or by phone or even video-conferencing (e.g. Skype).

4. Let them tell their story (...if they want to)
A big part of what we learned from patients and caregivers from our focus groups is the importance of being able to talk and share their story. People dealing with mental health issues often just want someone to listen. A simple “how are you doing?” is a good start. Often people feel more open to talking with others that have been through what they are going through. Suggest connecting with #SickNotWeak as an online community of people struggling with mental health and their caregivers. This will give them the opportunity to share, provide and receive advice (if they want), and raise awareness to reduce the stigma.
5. **Go that extra mile**

Patients struggling with mental illness are often just that... struggling. Sometimes their symptoms (anxiety, depressed mood, etc.) may be projected on the pharmacist and staff at the pharmacy. However, try to be patient and use verbal cues to try to redirect their behavior and see how you can help. Most of us wouldn’t look down on an agitated patient experiencing acute pain and may feel sympathetic. Remember that people experiencing acute mental health issues are also suffering and deserve the same care. Feedback we got from patients indicates that they would love their pharmacist to reach out and ask how they’re doing once in a while, and would welcome added support or additional resources if their pharmacist could refer them to this. You will get more information on how to source resources in your community at the *Whole Health Mental Health Education Day* and through our Partner’s Portal.

6. **Adherence to medications is often more difficult**

One of the most tangible things we heard from patients living with mental health issues is their desire for the pharmacy to help them remember their medications. Living day-to-day managing their condition can be challenging. Even if they believe the medication will help them, many people often find it difficult to remember to take their medications or manage their prescriptions and refills. A few suggestions you can offer at the pharmacy level to help these patients:

- Ask the patient if they would like refill reminders from the pharmacy. Use your pharmacy software system to help you manage this and actively follow-through with reaching out to the patient directly.
- Suggest compliance packaging for those who might benefit – people with complex medication regimens (multiple daily dosing, 3+ medications, etc.), patients who forget whether or not they’ve taken their medication, anyone who identifies adherence as a challenge for them.
- Remind patients in advance of when their prescription is running out. Implement a system that works at your pharmacy and stick with it. This may be setting reminders for specific patients, actively highlighting and telling patients on their last refill, suggesting a fax to their doctor in advance if they don’t have an appointment, etc. Make sure all pharmacists and pharmacy staff are on board with your policy so that all patients are getting the best service every time.
- Offer to sync their medications so they can get all prescriptions at the same time. There are a variety of resources to help you through this. A simple explanation and template sheet was provided by a fellow pharmacist Ali Zohouri online at Canadian Healthcare Network (you will need to create a login to access this site if you don’t already have one): [http://www.canadianhealthcarenetwork.ca/pharmacists/discussions/blogs/tips-and-processes-sync-those-pills-36787](http://www.canadianhealthcarenetwork.ca/pharmacists/discussions/blogs/tips-and-processes-sync-those-pills-36787)

Here is a more fulsome and complex medication synchronization program with a variety of resources as part of the Appointment Based Model from the American Pharmacists Association (APhA): [http://www.aphafoundation.org/appointment-based-model](http://www.aphafoundation.org/appointment-based-model)

7. **Caregivers need support**

Caregivers are also affected. Having a family member or loved one with a mental health condition can be very stressful. Individuals with mental illness often need extra love, help and support. At the same time, the person in need of the support may exhibit thoughts, fears and behaviours that put a strain on
the caregiver/loved one’s patience and ability to cope. Understand that the caregiver can have a variety of emotions from concern and compassion to anger, grief and guilt. The pharmacy team can support the caregiver by listening and being there to support them as much as the patient. You can connect them with the appropriate community resources to help their loved one. At the pharmacy level, consider suggestions of how to help them manage their loved ones’ medications more easily, e.g. refill reminders, compliance packaging or delivery. Often learning about the illness itself can help the caregiver understand and empathize with their loved one going through it. The pharmacist can help educate through one-on-one counselling or providing resources for them to learn on their own.

8. You are a caregiver too—self-care is important
As a pharmacist, you are caring for people dealing with mental health issues as well. Counselling and providing advice, especially when having some of the more difficult conversations or dealing with a patient who is really suffering, can take its toll on you. Remember, you are a person too. It is normal to be personally affected by this. We often recommend good self-care to our patients. Take your own advice! Some simple things you can do to rejuvenate:
  - Take a moment to focus on your breath. You can do this any time, any day. In the midst of a stressful rush in the dispensary this can help you re-focus.
  - Make better food choices, take some time to get your body moving doing something you love, and get adequate sleep. Practice what you preach!
  - Commit to a healthy work-life balance. When you have enough personal time to relax and connect with loved ones, you will be a better pharmacist and be able to help patients in a more dedicated way.

9. You Don’t Have to Do it Alone – Take a Holistic Approach
While working with patients with mental illness, you will undoubtedly uncover difficult issues they are dealing with that are not pharmacy-specific—trouble with personal relationships, socioeconomic factors like inability to find a job or appropriate food, etc. You don’t have to solve every one of the patient’s problems. Identifying the issue and connecting them with the right resource in your community is the best strategy to get them the best care. Are they or have they been suicidal? Refer them to a suicide hotline or local crisis centre. Do they need social assistance to support their daily needs like food and healthcare? Connect them to a social worker. Do they just need to talk? Perhaps a local therapist or even an online community to talk to people who’ve been through what they’re going through—like #SickNotWeak!

10. Anyone (and everyone!) can be affected
Mental illness affects all Canadians at some time through a family member, friend or colleague. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), 20% of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime. Don’t forget that it affects people of all ages, education and income levels, and cultures. When assessing who might be struggling (or may be supporting a loved one who is) and in need of additional support from the pharmacy—referral to resources, information, pharmacy services—don’t just look towards the obvious patients taking a psychotropic medication. Open your mind, train your ears, and use your head when identifying people you can help.