

The use of Chinese finger trap as a metaphor: A way to promote adherence to medical treatment for chronically ill patients



The concordance, compliance and adherence to medical treatment has been one of the major issues among the chronically ill patients as well as health care providers in different aspects [1,2]. This is particularly correct when complying with medical instructions that was given by doctors has been compromised. The challenge for improving adherence as well as complying with the medical treatment continue to rise among health care providers. The psycho-social support system has been one of the key elements in psychotherapy [3] as well as a key component for adherence to treatment [4]. However, many patients do not seek clarification on how to comply with their given treatments, or simply they stop taking their medication orderly [4]. This may be because of the help seeking behaviour does not usually occur until their presented problems exacerbated [5]. Acknowledging the necessity of support system by patients tend to be perceived as irrelevant or a sign of weakness. This become more evident when patients suffer from a chronic illness such as cancer [6]. Among these patients, their dignity often jeopardised due to their disorder. However, in order to assist patients holistically; it is highly significant to identify their immediate support system and encourage patient to seek support when it is deemed necessary. Therefore, their caregivers may reassure them to adhere or/and comply with their given medical treatment.

In the past, many metaphors have been successfully used in psychotherapy to assist patients to comprehend their presented problems [7]. Yet this was stated that, the use of metaphors has been a novelty [8]. In fact, it is reported by Earle that metaphors in learning can increase the retention rate by about 40% [9]. Therefore, hypothetically using metaphors while explaining the medical conditions as well as during psychological treatment might help patients to better understand of their diagnosis and treatment outcomes. Consequently, this may potentially decrease the misuse of medication and reduce unnecessary hospital visits [4], as well as decrease number of psychotherapy sessions.

The “Chinese Finger Trap” metaphor is used within the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach to assist patient to visualise how their problem encounter and effect their living. The *Chinese Finger Trap* is a toy in tube shaped made of a woven bamboo, and it is about the size of a pen. A person inserts his/her index fingers into each end of this toy, once the fingers are in (trapped), there is only one way to release the fingers. It is to relax both fingers and slowly move outwards [9]. However, according to Hoare, McIlveen & Hamilton, this metaphor has been only used to visualise fighting and struggling against an emotional problem (trap) and the only way to get out of this problem is to accept the emotional problem, observe and understand how it operates and let it go [10].

On the other hand, hypothetically also the *Chinese Finger Trap* metaphor can be used during explanation of the prescribed medication as well as in psychotherapy to emphasise the importance of support system, and how to utilise support for their diagnosed disorder

respectively. Since it was suggested that the only way to release the fingers were to relax both fingers and slowly move outwards [10,11]. Despite of this so called “only way”, there might be another way to release the fingers and utilise the metaphor for a different approach. It is to relax both fingers and get support from other dominant fingers, such as thumb and middle fingers as shown in Fig. 1. As a result, this might increase adherence to their treatment as it will give patients the opportunity to visualise the stimulus and their condition.

The instruction of emphasising the support system metaphor:

- Please show me your index fingers, your index fingers will represent yourself (See Fig. 1-A).
- Please insert both of your index fingers each side of the tube, the tube represents your problems/illness (See Fig. 1-B).
- You will see your index fingers (yourself) are trapped in the tube (problems/illness) (See Fig. 1-C).
- In order to escape (release) your fingers (yourself), slowly get support from your thumb and other fingers (family, friends, supporters etc.) (See Fig. 1-D).
- You may slowly see a release of your index finger (yourself), continue until both of your index fingers are released (See Fig. 1-E).
- Now your index fingers (yourself) are fully released from the tube (problems/illness) (See Fig. 1-F).

As a practical tool and an easy metaphor of using *Chinese Finger Trap* might help improve the existing communication related issues between health care professionals and patient [12,13]. The adherence and complying with medical treatment have been correlated with the lack of communication skills [14,15]. This will also emphasise “no rush in the treatment”, as if they release their fingers quickly they will fall in a deeper trap; while taking their fingers off slowly will help them to release. As a result, patients’ engagement with their treatment may be improved and boost their patience about the unpredictable treatment time.

In conclusion, it is hypothesised that the *Chinese Finger Trap* metaphor will assist emphasising the importance of help seeking behaviour, and effectiveness of support system among newly diagnosed patients with a serious chronic disorder such as cancer. This can be used to encourage chronically ill patients for help seeking behaviour. Consequently, it might assist patients to adhere and comply with their medical treatment by increasing their understanding of the support system. Therefore, utilising this specific metaphor might enable patients to continue to their treatment which will result longer life-span and better quality of life. As a result, it is anticipated that, this specific hypothesised metaphor is for people who suffer from a chronic illness as well people who encounter a psychological problem which will greatly contribute to the medicine and health psychology practice and literature.

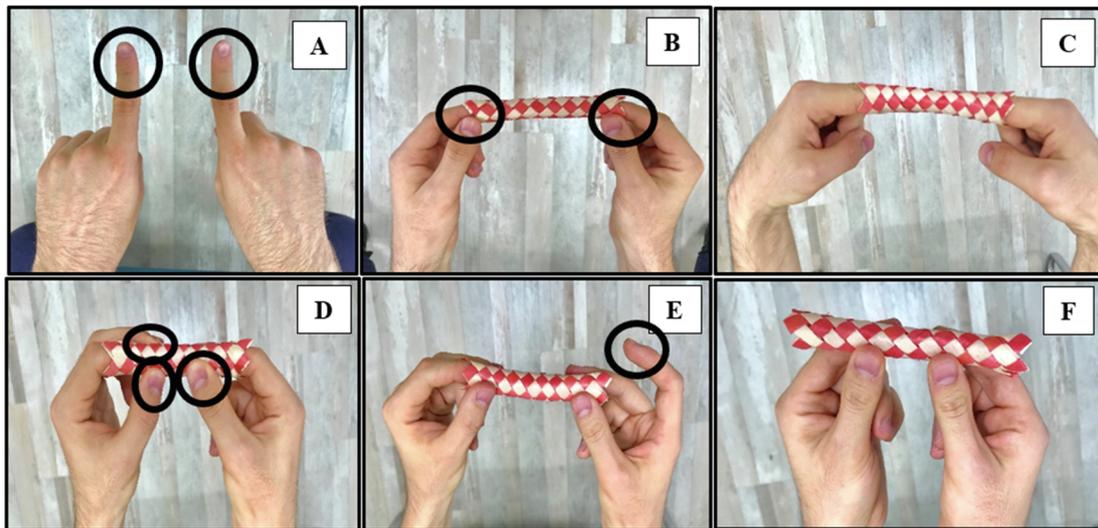


Fig. 1.

Declaration of Competing Interest

I have no conflict of interest to declare.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mehy.2019.109235>.

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