

*“Patients need help setting up reliable, sustainable systems at home.”*

—Joanne G. Schwartzberg, MD

### Meeting the Needs of Older Adults

Dr. Schwartzberg discussed the concept of *human factors*, which is the understanding of how humans perform work and interact with systems. These systems can be physical (e.g., musculoskeletal), cognitive (e.g., mental workload), and organizational (e.g., communication).<sup>28</sup> A patient’s level of confidence or confusion can influence his or her understanding and action. For example, does the patient know what work needs to be done, does he want to do it, and does he have what is needed to do the work?

Dr. Schwartzberg also discussed the influence of distractions—such as environmental, emotional, social, and physical factors—that can lead to confusion, error, and loss of confidence.

### A Therapeutic Alliance


Dr. Schwartzberg recommended that providers help patients set up a reliable, sustainable system at home, including a safe physical environment with emotional support and built-in error management. Clinicians should work with patients to carefully evaluate the work that needs to be done, and then design step-by-step materials and ways to monitor the patient’s success in using the system at home.

Best practices for patients with limited literacy include a brief

intervention with the physician followed by a 1-hour, intensive, one-on-one session with a nurse or pharmacist; a series of weekly telephone calls to provide additional education; and interactive follow-up sessions.

Through this approach, clinicians would provide a therapeutic alliance that meets patients’ need for trust and emotional support to complete the complicated work they have to do. This alliance would rely on interactive education with clear materials, coaching in basic navigational and organizational skills, repetition and reinforcement, and enough time for the support to be provided. In addition, Dr. Schwartzberg recommends that the self-care system use pictograms and plain language materials for instructions.





## Self-Care: Example of a Successful Program

Dr. Schwartzberg concluded her remarks by discussing a study that showed patients with limited literacy achieving better outcomes than those with adequate literacy when they used a reliable, sustainable self-care system.<sup>29</sup>

This study involved patients with heart failure whose doctors helped them organize the information they needed to manage their condition into a few simple directions. The resulting booklet included simple, clear graphics, easy-to-follow steps, daily instructions, and charts to fill out. Although the doctor meets with the patient first to explain the importance of the program,

the actual training is done one-on-one with a nurse. This training is followed by telephone contact and regular visits in which the doctor reviews the patient's written information. Although all patients improved and cut their rehospitalization rates by almost 50% (when compared with controls), patients with limited literacy did better than those with adequate literacy.

Even when older adults lack a high degree of literacy skills, Dr. Schwartzberg concluded, they can be successful in achieving health care goals when they are offered a reliable, sustainable self-care system that is useful in their everyday environment.