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A Middle-Range Theory of Self-Care of Chronic Illness

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Abstract

Nearly 50% of adults have one or more chronic illnesses. Self-care is considered essential in the management of chronic illness, but the elements of self-care in this context have not been specified in a middle-range theory. This article describes a middle-range theory of self-care that addresses the process of maintaining health with health promoting practices within the context of the management required of a chronic illness. The key concepts include self-care maintenance, self-care monitoring, and self-care management. Assumptions and propositions of the theory are specified. Factors influencing self-care including experience, skill, motivation, culture, confidence, habits, functional and cognition and support from others, and access to care are described.

Key words: chronic illness, middle-range theory, self-care
Introduction

Middle range theories describe a view of reality that deals with specific phenomena and a limited number of variables. The 20th century ended with considerable progress in the development of middle range theories in nursing. A recent search of the CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health) database revealed dozens of middle range theories addressing specific clinical phenomena with clear implications for nursing practice. Most of the middle range theories in the literature appear to have come directly from experience of nurse clinicians, although theories addressing pain, quality of life for the elderly, caregiver stress, and fatigue have evolved from the grand theories in nursing (eg, Roy, King, Neuman, Orlando).

Self-care is considered essential in the management of chronic illness, but the elements of self-care have not been specified in a middle-range theory that can be used across a variety of chronic conditions during the process of maintaining health. The aim of this article is to describe a middle-range theory of self-care in chronic illness, specifying the concepts, assumptions, propositions, and factors affecting self-care in this context. Intended and unintended outcomes of self-care are discussed and the manner in which the theory could illuminate and advance research and practice is described. This theory of self-care evolved from clinical practice caring for adults with heart failure. Those clinical experiences illustrated the challenges that patients had in caring for themselves when their decisions needed to be congruent with the needs dictated by their chronic condition. The theoretical base was formed from the situation-specific theory of heart failure self-care.

While we acknowledge that health is a dynamic, subjective process that is experienced uniquely among individuals, for those who seek care within the organized health care system, chronic illness imposes a set of behavioral requirements. The majority of the patients seek care
because they want relief from symptoms caused by their disease or its treatment. When providers interact with patients their intention is that the partnership they form will motivate patients to engage in self-care that can be incorporated into their lifestyle. It is within this context of a mutually rewarding relationship that the self-care of chronic illness takes place.

It would be disingenuous to ignore the influence of Dorthea Orem’s grand theory on our work. The main difference between Orem’s grand theory of self-care and this middle-range theory of self-care of chronic illness is that Orem’s theory is not focused on chronic illness as is this middle range theory. Orem defined self-care as “the practice of activities that individuals initiate and perform on their own behalf in maintaining life, health and well-being”\(^8\) (p.117). Our definition has similarities, but we address the process of self-care rather than specific activities. We focus primarily on individuals while Orem includes aspects of dependent care when others (self-care agents) initiate and perform activities to maintain life, health and well-being. In addition to the role of patients, Orem’s theory evolved from her quest for greater understanding of the nature of nursing so she specifies how nurses promote self-care and assess self-care demands, abilities and deficits in order to support patients in their self-care. An assumption of her theory is that every patient should care for him/herself, but when an imbalance between self-care needs and self-care abilities occurs there is a need for nursing intervention. Conversely, our goal was to codify the behaviors and processes used by individuals dealing with a diagnosis of a chronic illness and the attention given to nurses is limited. Further, rather than limiting this theory to nurses, we embrace all health care professionals as having a role in promoting self-care. We believe that if health care professionals better understand the process used by patients in performing self-care, they can use this information to identify where patients struggle. This
knowledge could be used to develop tailored interventions that improve outcomes for patients with chronic illness(es).

**Operational Definition of Concepts**

We define self-care as a process of maintaining health through health promoting practices and managing illness, as specified in our prior work. Self-care is performed in both healthy and ill states. Everyone engages in some level of self-care daily with tooth brushing, food choices, etc. When an ill individual is stable, s/he is often able to maintain health without moving into illness care. But, once one is ill and illness management becomes a priority, the need for self-care for health remains. Thus, self-care in healthy and ill states can be, but is not always, a simultaneous process. However, self-care is relatively more salient to patients with a chronic illness and therefore we see a clear clinical need for a middle-range theory in this field. Engaging in self-care makes the patient an active participant in the management of illness. It should be noted that self-care is not a permanent, black or white phenomenon. In other words, self-care is not the same for all patients nor is it necessarily consistent over time. Indeed, some activities that might be defined as judicious self-care for one patient might be inappropriate for another.

Key concepts in this middle-range theory are self-care maintenance, self-care monitoring, and self-care management. Self-care maintenance is defined as those behaviors used by patients with a chronic illness to maintain physical and emotional stability. As described further below, these behaviors may be entirely self-determined or reflect recommendations that are mutually agreed on between patients and their health care provider. Self-care monitoring refers to the process of observing oneself for changes in signs and symptoms. Self-care management is
defined as the response to signs and symptoms when they occur. Each of these concepts is discussed below. Note that these behaviors and activities will not always take place in the same, linear order and certain steps might be skipped.

*Self-care maintenance.* Self-care maintenance refers to those behaviors performed to improve well-being, preserve health, or to maintain physical and emotional stability. In well individuals self-care focuses on self-improvement, but in the face of a chronic illness, many self-care maintenance behaviors mirror the recommendations of providers. These behaviors could be related to life-style (e.g. smoking cessation, preparing healthy food, coping with stress) or the medical regimen (e.g. taking medication as prescribed). These activities may be imposed by others (e.g. health care professionals or family members) and then agreed on by the patient or solely chosen by the patient to meet his/her own goals. Self-care maintenance benefits from reflection about the usefulness of the behavior, vigilance in performance of the behavior, and an on-going evaluation of benefits and the effectiveness of the activities. In addition, adaptation is often needed to accommodate changing conditions.

Adherence is an essential component of self-care maintenance. Adherence to therapies shown to be evidence-based is associated with the best outcomes. The goal for health care providers is to work collaboratively with patients to negotiate the adoption of as many of the advocated behaviors as the patient can tolerate and accept, with an emphasis on those therapies with the best evidence to support them.

*Self-care monitoring.* Self-care monitoring is a process of routine, vigilant body monitoring, surveillance, or “body listening". Monitoring is a normal human behavior. For example, many people monitor their weight regularly to follow gains and losses. Many visit the dentist to monitor their success in avoiding dental caries. In self-care of chronic illness,
monitoring that is systematic and routine produces the best outcomes. For example, patients with asthma are encouraged to perform routine peak flow monitoring and symptom assessment and then intervene according to their asthma action plan to achieve the best possible health outcomes. Monitoring activities, such as checking blood sugar for diabetes, weighing daily for heart failure, and monitoring emotions in mental illness help to achieve physical and emotional stability. Three criteria are required for effective self-care monitoring. First, clinically significant changes over time in the condition must be possible. Second, a method of reliably detecting these changes must exist. Finally, a reasonable action must be possible in response.

The goal of self-care monitoring is recognition that a change has occurred. That change may be related to a chronic illness or not, but the self-care process under discussion here is the change occurring due to the chronic illness. Recognition of a physical change is facilitated by somatic awareness, defined as sensitivity to physical sensations and bodily activity. Recognition of an emotional change is aided by personal insight and interpersonal awareness. For individuals with chronic illness, sign or symptom recognition begins the process of decision-making about what action is needed. When signs and symptoms are detected early and the seriousness of them is understood, action can be taken before the situation escalates. Patients who are skilled in self-care monitoring can communicate information to a health care professional that will facilitate the provider’s ability to give the best care. Self-care monitoring is the link between self-care maintenance and self-care management.

Self-care management. Self-care management involves an evaluation of changes in physical and emotional signs and symptoms to determine if action is needed. These changes may be due to illness, treatment, or the environment. Those who are best in self-care comprehend the meaning of changes and are able to mentally simulate options and decide on a course of action. If
a response is needed, self-care management entails treatment implementation and the evaluation of the treatment. Treatments are often specific to the signs and symptoms of a particular chronic illness. For example, shortness of breath due to asthma may require use of a bronchodilator but shortness of breath due to heart failure may require taking an extra diuretic. Another important point about self-care management is that the treatment indicated may require consultation with a health care provider, depending on the messages the patient is given by the provider about independent modifications of therapies.

Finally, self-care management requires attention to the effectiveness of a treatment to evaluate whether or not that approach should be tried again in the future. Situation awareness promotes treatment evaluation by facilitating the perception of events, the comprehension of their meaning, and the projection of their status into the future. In this context, situation awareness involves alertness to bodily sensations (somatic awareness) and the ability to reliably determine how these sensations change in response to treatments implemented.

**Processes Underlying Self-Care**

*Decision-Making.* One underlying process that makes self-care so complex is the need for decision-making. In our early work, the management of symptoms was said to involve cognitive decision making undertaken in response to signs and symptoms. The basis of cognitive decision-making is classical decision theory, which prescribes analytical and systematic methods of weighing evidence prior to selecting a course of action. Later we came to realize that patients rarely use such a methodical, rational decision-making process. That is, they rarely generate and compare options in a systematic fashion. Naturalistic decision-making is a better description of the process used by patients in self-care.
Naturalistic decision-making reflects the automatic, impulsive, contextual decisions that people make in complex real world situations. Real world situations are typically ambiguous, options are often vague, and decisions need to be made quickly. Real world decisions involve dynamically evolving conditions, uncertainty, ambiguity, missing information, time stress, and high stakes. These decisions may have goals that are ill-defined, shifting, or competing. Sometimes multiple individuals are involved in the decision making process. For example, patients with acute symptoms are facing a decision with important consequences. This situation will certainly evolve and the evolution may be rapid. A thorough decision-analysis is not a reasonable expectation in this situation.

Reflection. Reflection or contemplation is linked to knowledge acquisition, both of which are essential for self-care. As shown in figure 1, self-care may be sufficient or insufficient, purposive or unintentional, reasoned and reflective, or automatic and unobservant. This dichotomizing of the process builds on Orem’s statement that “self-care is purposeful actions performed in sequence and with a pattern.” Among patients with low knowledge or poor in-depth understanding of the rationale for self-care, many will perform little self-care of any quality (lower left quadrant). Perhaps more surprisingly, there will be those who perform self-care activities but do so in an unreflective and unobservant fashion (top left quadrant). For example, many patients take their medications without knowing why they have been prescribed. Other patients dutifully monitor themselves, but do not know what to do with the information they gather. Presumably patients with inadequate knowledge could be involved in targeted education and thereby increase their self-care. However, the contribution of inadequate reflection needs to be addressed directly. Perhaps these patients would benefit from situation-based
discussions that promote reflection. Research testing approaches to helping patients become reflective and purposive about their self-care is needed.

Other patients are reflective, but actively choose not to engage in self-care (bottom right quadrant). These individuals possess the knowledge and understanding of the self-care needed for their condition, but after reflection and perhaps a personal cost-benefit analysis, they make an informed choice not to perform the recommended self-care. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as reasoned decision-making, intelligent non-adherence, or self-regulation. Little has been written about the ethics of how to interact with chronically ill patients who choose not to perform self-care, but respect for autonomy and freedom of choice is essential. Motivational interviewing is one evidence-based approach to handling these challenging situations.

The ideal combination for a person with chronic illness is purposive, reflective, sufficient and reasoned self-care. Patients in this group (top right quadrant) are knowledgeable about the self-care needed for their condition. They perform self-care with thought about the meaning of the data they gather and make good decisions about what to do if signs or symptoms are abnormal. In order to reach a state of reflective, knowledgeable, sufficient self-care, patients are motivated and have received targeted education from a health care professional or have been very successful in seeking information and contemplating their options.

**Development of the Theory of Self-Care of Chronic Illness**

Building on our prior work and the conceptual work briefly outlined above, this middle range theory of self-care was developed in discussions among the authors regarding our prior work in self-care, the existing situation-specific theory of heart failure self-care, and the various self-care studies we have conducted with heart failure populations across the world.
Discussions involved the meaning of the construct for a broader audience of patients with chronic illness and ways in which our prior, separate work could be integrated. First every concept and proposition of the situation-specific theory of heart failure self-care was evaluated and refined. A new version of the model was developed as a group and discussed as it applies to a variety of chronic illness states (Figure 2).

The major change made to the definitions of self-care maintenance and self-care management involved pulling out self-care monitoring as a separate concept. Here we specify that self-care monitoring is a distinct concept although it remains the bridge between self-care maintenance and self-care management with implications for both. In addition, an element of choice was added to self-care maintenance. That is, one may follow a low-fat diet, for example, because of the belief that it is required (i.e. imposed by another) or out of choice.

Finally, the literature on self-care is conceptually confusing. Numerous terms are used to refer to the same behavior (e.g. self-management, self-monitoring). In this theory we have clarified how various concepts can be integrated and used in relation to each other.

**Assumptions**

Premises accepted without proof are referred to as assumptions. This theory includes three assumptions:

1. There are differences between general self-care and illness-specific self-care. As noted in the introduction, in this article we are focusing on the self-care that occurs in the context of a chronic illness. General self-care is a dynamic, subjective process influenced by age, gender, culture, education, socioeconomic status, etc. Self-care that occurs in association with a chronic illness is circumscribed and influenced by others.
2. Decision-making requires the ability to focus attention, to think, sufficient capacity for working memory and the ability to understand and weigh information.

3. Self-care for patients with multiple comorbid conditions may be conflicting when self-care is considered for each illness separately. A growing body of literature illustrates the complexity that patients face when trying to incorporate advice from multiple providers.27

Propositions

A scientific theory contains testable predictions or propositions. Seven propositions are proposed for this middle range theory of self-care.

1. There are core similarities in self-care across different chronic illnesses. For example, self-care monitoring is needed by patients with cancer, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and so forth.

2. Previous personal experience with illness or in caring for someone with a similar illness or with similar self-care needs increases the quality of self-care. That is, the processes of self-care are learned and that learning can occur through personal experience or during the process of caring for someone else.

3. Patients who engage in self-care that is purposive but unreflective are limited in their ability to master self-care in complex situations. Self-care is a learned process, so those who do not reflect on what they are learning have difficulty achieving a high level of mastery. Reflective self-care can be learned.

4. Misunderstandings, misconceptions, and lack of knowledge all contribute to insufficient self-care. This proposition captures the relationship between patients and the providers who devote their careers to helping patients master the knowledge needed for self-care.

6. Self-care monitoring for changes in signs or symptoms is necessary for effective self-care management because one cannot make a decision about a change unless it has been noticed and evaluated.

7. Individuals who perform evidence-based self-care have better outcomes than those who perform self-care that is not evidence-based.

**Intended and Unintended Outcomes of Self-Care**

One important intended outcome of self-care is illness stability, health, well-being and quality of life as implied in the term ‘maintenance’. In addition to these, intended outcomes of self-care include an increase in perceived control over the illness and a decrease in the anxiety often associated with chronic illness. These patient-centered outcomes are of primary importance for this theory of self-care, but there is a growing body of literature suggesting that self-care can decrease hospitalization, cost and mortality, which has captured the attention of health economists.

Although the rapidity of treatment seeking behavior is a provider goal because of the known association with outcomes, rapid care seeking is not always the patients’ goal, and unintended outcomes of self-care include a delay in treatment seeking. We demonstrated previously that maintaining a high level of perceived control during an acute illness event may increase treatment-seeking delay among patients with coronary artery disease. Others have found when an illness is acute, high perceived control plus low anxiety can cause self-deception,
denial, and failure to seek care. Other unintended outcomes could include a higher burden associated with the need to perform self-care and guilt when one fails to follow treatment advice. In addition, self-care could actually increase illness costs by stimulating the patient to seek care even when it is not necessary.

Factors Affecting Self-Care

Self-care is an extremely challenging process, as evidenced by the burgeoning body of literature describing the challenges experienced by patients and clinicians alike. Some of the major factors serving as barriers and facilitators to self-care are described below.

Experience and Skill. Experience is one powerful contributor to the development of skill in self-care. Prior experiences are used to quickly identify patterns that provide relevant cues, suggest expected outcomes associated with specific responses, and point to reasonable goals and actions in specific types of situations. A simple pattern match may lead to recognition of the typicality of a situation, which would require a specific action. Or, if the situation is unfamiliar, it might involve consideration of options evaluated by mental simulation.

Skill in self-care is essential and patients need to have the ability to plan, set goals, and make decisions. Experience also contributes to the development of skill, although some patients can have years of experience with a particular illness and never develop skill in self-care. The challenge for health care professionals is to identify what patients have learned from experience, discern if what is known is correct, and facilitate the development of skills that are necessary for the performance of self-care.

Motivation. Motivation can be defined as the force driving humans to achieve their goals. Motivation is said to be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation springs from the wish to
assimilate and learn and includes aspect of enjoyment and interest. Intrinsic motivation is driven by an internal desire to perform a particular task because that task gives pleasure. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation refers to changing a behavior because it leads to a specific predetermined outcome that is desirable for some reason (e.g. to improve health, to please others). Many self-care behaviors are triggered and driven by extrinsic motivators, at least initially. That is, the individual may not be internally motivated to perform a behavior, but the perception of significant others regarding the importance of performing the behavior may motivate self-care.\(^{37}\)

*Cultural beliefs and values.* Self-care might been seen as highly important in countries and cultures where independence is valued, but in some cultures self-care is not important. In these situations, it may be of greater importance to show love and concern through care and attention when a family member is ill.\(^{38}\) This behavior might also be relevant in cultures where collectivist ideals influence adoption of lifestyle changes.\(^{39}\) Sometimes self-care advice might contradict cultural beliefs, for example to promote rest in contrast to activity as recommended for patients with chronic heart failure.\(^{40}\)

*Confidence.* Self-care is strongly influenced by attitudes and beliefs such as self-efficacy, defined as the confidence that one has in the ability to perform a specific action and to persist in performing that action despite barriers.\(^{41,42}\) The concept of confidence was discussed in our early work on self-care where confidence was conceptualized as a component of self-care.\(^{15}\) However, later testing revealed that confidence in the ability to perform self-care moderates the relationship between self-care and outcome,\(^{43}\) leading us to conclude that confidence is not a part of self-care.\(^{6,44}\) Confidence in the ability to perform self-care is important in each stage of the self-care process.
Habits. Habits or daily routines are important factors affecting self-care. Some patients get used to performing certain self-care behaviors and self-care becomes part of their daily routine. For other patients, however, self-care is considered ‘work’. For them, the regimen remains a continuous struggle. Perhaps those who are most successful in self-care are willing to adopt imposed behaviors until these behaviors evolve into habits with time.

Functional and Cognitive Abilities. Performing self-care requires the functional ability to engage in the required behaviors (e.g. balancing on a scale). Problems with hearing, vision, manual dexterity and energy can make self-care difficult. In addition, a growing body of knowledge illustrates that chronic illnesses are commonly associated with cognitive deficits that can make self-care particularly challenging.

Support from Others. Although self-care is, by definition, performed by individuals, it would be naïve to suggest that self-care is always done alone. Instead, most chronically ill individuals would acknowledge the essential contributions (communication, decision making, and reciprocity) of family and friends—a process referred to as shared care when it involves two competent adults.

Access to care. Self-care of chronic illness is often influenced to some degree by providers after accessing the health care system to obtain care. However, it should be acknowledged that a large proportion of those with a chronic illness lack access to providers within the organized health care system for a variety of reasons (e.g. economic, location). These individuals obtain guidance from village elders, community workers, parents, neighbors, and friends. But, without access to trained health care providers, the outcomes associated with chronic illness are typically poor.
Clinical and Research Implications

Not everyone is capable of performing self-care. Self-care is restricted to those who are able to make judicious decisions. Focused attention and working memory capacity are needed to perceive and process information prior to selecting a course of action and executing it. Individuals with limited attention and memory have little ability to understand and reflect (e.g., infants, individuals with dementia) and thus may not be able to perform self-care. Those with severe psychiatric illness may have difficulty performing independent self-care. Even situational influences on attention and memory such as sleep deprivation or emotional stress can interfere with self-care. In these situations shared care, dependent care, or community support is needed.

In conclusion, we believe that the theory proposed will be useful to both health care professionals and to researchers. In clinical practice, the theory can be used to structure an assessment of where in the self-care process a particular patient is struggling. Someone who is unable to recognize symptoms needs a very different intervention than someone who is poor in self-care maintenance. For example, symptom recognition may need skill while adoption of specific self-care maintenance behaviors may require motivation. Assessment of where in the process a particular patient is having difficulty will lead to a tailored intervention that may be more advantageous and cost-effective than a general intervention that addresses areas of self-care that the patient has already mastered.

The usefulness of this theory to researchers is that the theory provides a structure that can focus research efforts and speed the attainment of results that can be translated into clinical practice. Specific suggestions for research include the development of measures of self-care for various chronic illnesses based on the theory. Intervention studies testing different types of approaches to improving self-care are greatly needed. Methods of promoting reflection published
in the pedagogy literature could be adapted and tested to promote self-care. Culturally-relevant studies are needed to accommodate differences in particular cultural groups. Importantly, studies testing how self-care influences outcomes are greatly needed.
References


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Figure 1: Relationship of decision-making and reflection on self-care. Self-care may be sufficient or insufficient, reasoned and reflective, or automatic and mindless. Various combinations of reflection and sufficiency of self-care are illustrated in this figure. The ideal combination is reflective and sufficient self-care.
Figure 2: Self-care maintenance, self-care monitoring, and self-care management are core elements of the self-care of chronic illness. Self-care management entails a process of recognition of changes in signs and symptoms, decision-making about self-care actions, and evaluation of the outcomes of that action. Although each element is unique, they function in a synchronous fashion to maintain health and facilitate management of illness. As discussed further in the text, a variety of factors influence the success of individual patients in the performance of self-care.