

# The Arthur Kleinman Explanatory Model

Arthur Kleinman's Eight Questions Understanding your client's explanatory model helps you provide patient-centered care. The explanatory model includes the client's beliefs about their illness, the personal and social meaning they attach to their disorder, expectations about what will happen to them and what the provider will do, and their own therapeutic goals. The concept of the explanatory model was first proposed by Arthur Kleinman, who developed a set of eight questions to ask a client to learn more about their explanatory model. These questions are below. Ask them in order.

## 8 Questions to ask your clients

### **1. What do you think caused your problem?**

This question gets at the patient's beliefs about the cause of illness, probably the most fundamental and important aspect of the explanatory model.

### **2. What do you call the illness/problem?**

This question is especially helpful when you suspect the patient believes a particular folk illness to be causing the symptoms.

### **3. Why do you think it started when it did?**

This can link the illness to certain events in the patient's life that may be important elements of the explanatory model.

### **4. What do you know about the illness and how it works?**

Many patients may not be able to describe how the illness works at this level, but will have some understanding of what it means to them.

### **5. How severe is the problem? How worried are you about it?**

Patients may be very worried about an illness while the physician is not. For example, when there are symptoms that do not suggest any concerning disease but are very upsetting to the patient. This is important to discuss as openly as possible.

### **6. What kind of treatment/help do you think you should receive? What are the most important results you hope to get from this treatment?**

Part of the patient's understanding of the illness has to do with beliefs about its treatment. The patient's opinions on traditional, western and alternative therapies should be taken into consideration.

### **7. What are the main problems the illness has caused?**

Understanding this allows better insight into the patient's unique illness experience.

### **8. What do you fear most about the illness?**

This is a crucial question because it allows the physician to tailor the explanation of the illness and its treatment to the patient's concerns.

Source: Kleinman, A. 1988, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition*, Basic Books, New York.