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Leveraging Behavioral Economics to Guide Healthy Decision-Making

People living with long-term health conditions make many decisions about their health, often on a daily basis, including whether to adhere to prescribed treatments. What insights from the world of psychology can help us create effective programs that guide healthy decision-making around adherence?

One important insight is a fundamental tenet from the discipline of behavioral economics: *Decision-making behavior isn't necessarily rational.*

Behavioral economics applies psychology insights to understand how people make real-life decisions. Although the term may imply a connection to finance, it's not exclusively about how we spend our money. While that is one decision, behavioral economics can be applied to nearly any decision in our lives. This includes patient decisions relating to health behaviors, such as the choice to take treatment as prescribed.

A key assumption within behavioral economics is that individuals are inherently irrational, with a tendency towards making common errors when it comes to decision-making.

What does this mean for patient health behavior?

Once we understand this concept, we can create strategies for messages, or message environments, that reduce the likelihood of these errors occurring. Here are two examples of how errors in decision-making can be mitigated in a patient support program:

- ▶ **Temporal discounting** - this phenomenon refers to a person's tendency to place more value on immediate gains versus longer-term benefits, sometimes described in the context of impulsivity or the desire for instant gratification.
 - Rather than focusing solely on longer-term benefits of medication, pharma can consider supporting patients to set shorter-term goals and to associate regular medication taking with small steps towards meeting these goals.
- ▶ **Choice overload** - this term describes the phenomenon whereby individuals become overwhelmed by too many choices and may lead to decision deferral or avoidance.
 - Support programs can limit choices in patient communication tools to 3 or 4 options, or offer a default option.

Involve Experts

As with many new trends, the use of behavioral economics is occasionally criticized as coercive or manipulative. Clearly, it's important to have trained psychology experts lead the application of these insights for patient support materials. It's also important to apply these principles with sensitivity and within a framework of patient-centricity, respecting autonomous choice and offering some level of transparency so patients have an awareness of the strategies being employed.

Learn more about our use of behavioral economics in patient support programs at www.atlantishealthcare.com. [@AtlantisHlthUS](https://twitter.com/AtlantisHlthUS)