

7 STEPS TO CREATING A TREATMENT PLAN YOUR PATIENT WILL FOLLOW

Using the Well-Formed Outcome Model from NLP

Adapted from the NLP Well-Formed Outcome model for allied health practice
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Why Treatment Plans Fail

You've created the perfect treatment plan. Evidence-based exercises. Clear instructions. Realistic timeline.

Your patient nods enthusiastically, promises they'll follow through, and leaves your clinic with the best of intentions.

Two weeks later, they return having done almost nothing.

Sound familiar?

This is an uncomfortable truth: when treatment plans fail, it's rarely because patients don't care. **It's because we've designed the plan for them instead of with them.**

We tell them what they need to do. We explain why it matters. We give them the plan over and expect compliance.

But compliance isn't the same as commitment. And without genuine ownership of the goal, adherence crumbles the moment life gets busy, complicated, or overwhelming.

There's a better way.

The Well-Formed Outcome (WFO) model from Neuro-Linguistic Programming provides a structured framework for creating treatment plans that patients actually follow—not because you've convinced them, but because they've designed the outcome themselves.

This isn't about lowering standards or accepting minimal effort. It's about shifting from prescription to partnership—from "here's what you need to do" to "what do you want to achieve, and how can we get you there together?"

In this guide, you'll learn:

- The 7-step Well-Formed Outcome framework for collaborative treatment planning
- How to help patients define goals they genuinely own
- Why focusing on patient control (not clinician control) increases adherence
- How to conduct an "ecology check" that prevents goal sabotage
- A complete clinical scenario showing all 7 steps in action
- Quick reference tools for immediate implementation

 The best treatment plan isn't the one that's most evidence-based. It's the one the patient will actually do.

The Well-Formed Outcome Model Explained

What Makes an Outcome "Well-Formed"?

In NLP, a "well-formed outcome" isn't just a goal—it's a carefully constructed target that meets specific criteria designed to maximize the likelihood of success.

The model emphasizes that goals should be:

Clear

Both parties understand exactly what success looks like

Achievable

Within the patient's realistic capability

Positively framed

Focused on what they want, not what they want to avoid

Patient-owned

Under their direct control, not dependent on others

Ecologically sound

Fits their whole life without creating new problems

Why This Matters in Clinical Practice:

Traditional treatment planning often focuses on what the clinician thinks the patient needs. The WFO model flips this—it starts with what the patient wants and builds a treatment plan around that intrinsic motivation.

The result?

Goals that feel personally meaningful rather than imposed. Plans that account for real-world constraints rather than ideal conditions. Outcomes that patients are genuinely invested in achieving.

The Seven Steps:

1. Define What is Wanted (Positive Framing)
2. Define the evidence of achieving what is wanted
3. Ensure the Goal is Under the Patient's Control
4. Gather Resources and Identify Challenges
5. Conduct an Ecology Check
6. Define Evidence for Success
7. Establish First Steps

Each step serves a specific purpose in creating a goal that's not just clear, but genuinely motivating and sustainable.

This shared understanding facilitates a collaborative and successful treatment journey.

Step 1: Define What is Wanted (Positive Framing)

Focus on Moving Toward, Not Away From

The first step involves asking the patient what they want in positive terms.

This means focusing on what they want to achieve, not what they want to avoid.

Why It Matters:

The human brain struggles to process negatives. When you say "don't think about a pink elephant," what happens? You immediately picture a pink elephant.

Similarly, when patients focus on what they want to avoid ("I don't want to feel pain"), they're mentally rehearsing the very experience they're trying to escape.

Positive framing shifts the focus from limitations to possibilities, from problems to solutions.

Examples of the Shift:



Instead of:

"I don't want to feel pain anymore."

Try:

"I want to feel comfortable during my daily activities."



Instead of:

"I don't want to be so stiff in the mornings."

Try:

"I want to wake up feeling mobile and ready to move."



Instead of:

"I don't want to give up tennis."

Try:

"I want to get back to playing tennis pain-free."

The Psychological Impact:

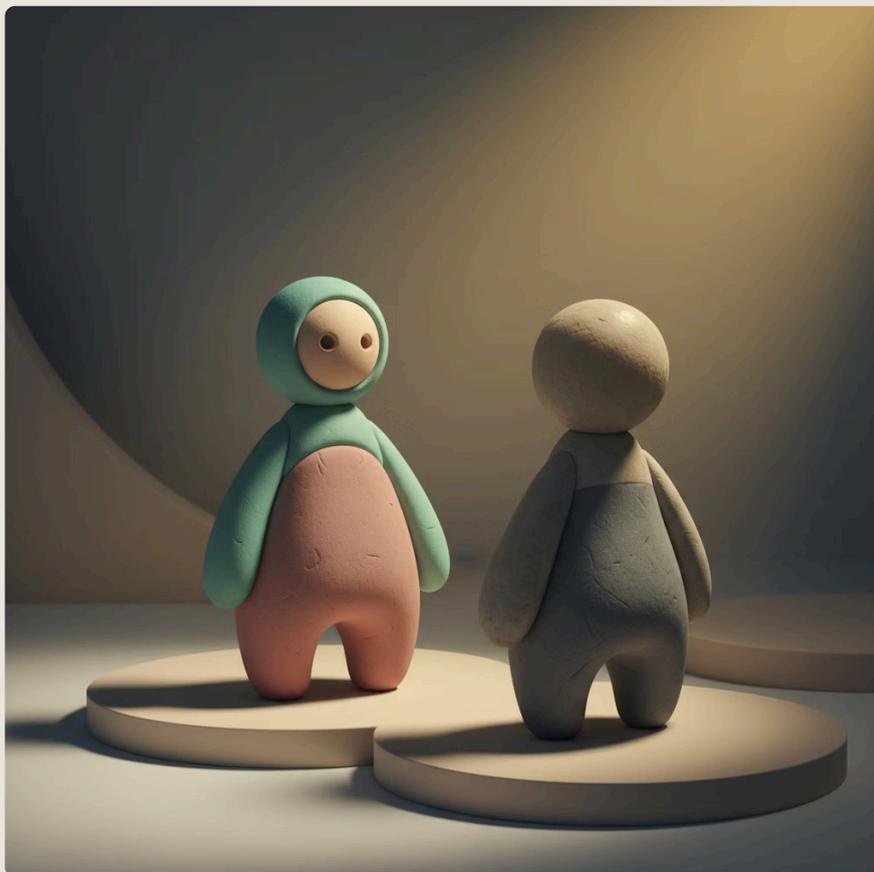
Positive framing helps patients visualise success, making goals more motivating and actionable.

It shifts focus from limitations to possibilities, empowering patients to actively participate in their recovery.

When patients can clearly picture what they're working toward, they're far more likely to stay committed when the work gets hard.

Questions to Ask:

- "What would you like to be able to do that you can't do right now?"
- "When you think about being fully recovered, what does that look like?"
- "What do you want to achieve through this treatment?"



Step 2: Establish an Acceptable Outcome

Make Success Specific and Measurable

The second step involves defining the desired future state in clear and measurable terms.

Both the clinician and the patient should understand exactly what success looks like.

Why It Matters:

Vague goals create vague results. "I want to feel better" is lovely, but it's impossible to measure, track, or know when you've achieved it.

Specific, measurable outcomes create clarity, accountability, and momentum.

Examples of the Shift:

Vague Goals:

- "I want to feel better."
- "I want to get stronger."
- "I want more mobility."

Specific Goals:

- "I want to be able to walk for 30 minutes without pain."
- "I want to be able to lift my grandchildren without back pain."
- "I want to be able to reach the top shelf in my kitchen cupboard without difficulty."

The Collaboration Benefit:

This step ensures both parties have a shared understanding of the treatment goal, minimizing potential misunderstandings.

It creates shared responsibility for achieving success—you're both aiming at the same target, which fundamentally changes the therapeutic relationship from authority/compliance to partnership/collaboration.

Questions to Ask:

- "What would 'success' look like specifically?"
- "How will you know you've achieved this?"
- "Can you describe what you'll be able to do when we've succeeded?"

Critical Note: Make sure the outcome is realistic and achievable within a reasonable timeframe. Overly ambitious goals set patients up for failure and discouragement.

Step 3: Ensure the Goal is Under the Patient's Control

Focus on What They Can Actually Control

The third step emphasises that the goal should be within the patient's ability to achieve. It should depend on actions they can take themselves.

Why It Matters:

When goals depend on things outside the patient's control—other people's decisions, external circumstances, luck—the patient feels powerless. And powerlessness kills motivation.

By focusing on areas where the patient has control, this step empowers them in the process.

Examples of the Shift:

Instead of:

"I want my boss to let me off work early"

Try:

"I want to discuss with my boss what I need to do to leave early"

Instead of:

"I want to be able to play [sport] in 6 months' time."

Try:

"I want to be in the best physical shape possible to be selected to play [sport] in 6 months' time."

(The patient can control how much work they put in, but not whether the coach selects them for the team.)

Instead of:

"I want my family to stop stressing me out."

Try:

"I want to develop strategies for staying calm when family situations are tense."

The Empowerment Effect:

This acknowledges that true change often stems from within, rather than external influences.

It stops patients from waiting for circumstances to change and puts them in the driver's seat of their own recovery.

When patients realise the outcome depends on their choices—not on luck, other people, or perfect conditions—they take ownership.

Questions to Ask:

- "What parts of this are within your direct control?"
- "What actions can you take, regardless of what anyone else does?"
- "If everything external stayed the same, what could you still influence?"

Step 4: Gather Resources and Identify Challenges

Assess What Helps and What Hinders

This step involves identifying the resources the patient needs to achieve the goal and addressing any potential challenges.

Why It Matters:

Every patient comes with unique assets (support systems, past successes, personal strengths) and unique barriers (time constraints, family responsibilities, financial constraints, past failures).

Ignoring either sets the plan up for failure. Acknowledging both creates a realistic, tailored approach.

Resources to Identify:

- **Support systems:** "Do you have someone at home who can help you with these exercises?"
- **Past successes:** "What's worked for you in the past when you've tried to build a new habit?"
- **Environmental supports:** "Where in your home could you set up a space for exercises?"
- **Time availability:** "When during your day do you typically have 10-15 minutes to yourself?"
- **Internal strengths:** "What personal qualities have helped you overcome challenges before?"

Challenges to Address:

- **Time constraints:** "How will this rehab plan work in terms of your family and work commitments?"
- **Physical limitations:** "What movements or positions are currently difficult for you?"
- **Motivation barriers:** "What typically derails you when you're trying to stick to a new routine?"
- **Environmental obstacles:** "What gets in the way of you doing exercises at home?"

The Collaborative Problem-Solving:

Openly discussing limitations and developing strategies together empowers patients to overcome obstacles.

This step ensures that the treatment plan is tailored to the patient's individual circumstances and resources—not based on an idealised version of their life.

When you co-design solutions to predictable barriers, adherence improves dramatically.

Step 5: Conduct an Ecology Check

Ensure the Goal Fits the Patient's Whole Life

The ecology check ensures that achieving the goal will have a positive impact on all areas of the patient's life.

This step considers the broader implications, including family, work, and mental wellbeing.

Why It Matters:

A goal might look perfect on paper but create chaos in real life. If achieving the goal means:

- Neglecting family time
- Increasing work stress
- Sacrificing mental health
- Creating financial strain
- Disrupting sleep or other health habits

...then it's not actually a good goal. It's unsustainable, and the patient's life will eventually push back against it.

Questions to Ask:

- "If you start walking every morning, will that fit into your current schedule and balance with your family responsibilities?"
- "What might you need to give up or adjust to make room for this?"
- "How will your family/partner feel about the time this requires?"
- "Are there any downsides to achieving this goal that we should consider?"
- "What else in your life might be affected—positively or negatively—if you succeed at this?"

The Hidden Benefits:

Sometimes the ecology check reveals unexpected positive side effects:

"If I start doing morning walks, I'll actually have 30 minutes of quiet time to myself, which I desperately need."

Other times, it reveals deal-breakers that need addressing:

"If I commit to three gym sessions per week, I'll miss my daughter's dance classes. That's not acceptable to me."

Better to know this now and adjust the plan, rather than discover it when the patient stops showing up.

The Sustainability Principle:

This step ensures the goal is sustainable and fits the patient's lifestyle to prevent unintended negative impacts.

It emphasizes a holistic approach to treatment, considering the patient's overall wellbeing.

Goals that integrate smoothly into existing life structures stick. Goals that require life upheaval don't.



Steps 6 : Define Evidence

Create Clear Markers of Progress

In this step, clear evidence is defined that will indicate the goal has been achieved.

This should be something both the clinician and the patient can observe and agree upon.

Why It Matters:

Without clear evidence, success is subjective and easy to dismiss. Patients can hit their target without realising it, which robs them of the confidence boost they've earned.

Conversely, vague markers mean patients never feel like they're making progress, which kills motivation.

Examples:

Vague:

- "You'll feel better."
- "Your mobility will improve."
- "You'll be stronger."

Clear:

- "You'll know you've succeeded when you can lift your child without any back pain."
- "You'll be able to bend down and tie your shoes without stiffness or discomfort."
- "You'll be able to carry two full shopping bags from the car to the house without shoulder pain."

The Motivation Multiplier: Defining evidence for success provides tangible milestones for the patient, making progress clearer and more motivating.

It creates celebration moments. When a patient achieves an evidence marker, they can definitively say: "I did it. This is working."

That psychological win fuels continued effort.



Step 7: Establish First Steps

Break the Goal Into Immediate Actions

The final step involves identifying the very first actions the patient will take toward their goal.

These should be small, specific, and achievable within the next few days.

Why It Matters:

A beautiful long-term goal means nothing if the patient doesn't know what to do tomorrow.

The gap between "I want to run a 5K in six months" and "what do I do today?" is where most treatment plans die.

First steps create immediate momentum and remove the paralysis of overwhelm.

Examples:



Long-term goal:

"I want to be able to garden pain-free by spring."

First step:

"This week, I'll do the three core strengthening exercises you showed me, right after breakfast, every day."



Long-term goal:

"I want to return to hiking within six months."

First step:

"This weekend, I'll walk for 10 minutes on flat ground and notice how my knee responds."



Long-term goal:

"I want to sleep through the night without shoulder pain."

First step:

"Tonight, I'll try the new pillow positioning we discussed and track how my shoulder feels in the morning."

The Momentum Principle: Small, immediate actions build confidence and create the psychological momentum needed for long-term change.

Each completed first step proves to the patient: "I can do this. I'm capable. This is working."

That belief is what sustains them through the harder moments ahead.

Critical Implementation Note: Make the first step so small that failure is nearly impossible. You're building momentum and confidence, not testing willpower.

Real Clinical Scenario: The 7 Steps in Action

Meet Sarah: From Prescription to Partnership

The Situation:

Sarah, 48, presents with chronic lower back pain that's preventing her from playing with her two young grandchildren. She's tried physiotherapy before but "never stuck with it."

Let's see how the Well-Formed Outcome model transforms her treatment planning.

STEP 1: Define What is Wanted (Positive Framing)

You: "Sarah, instead of focusing on what you want to avoid, tell me—what do you want to be able to do?"

Sarah: "I want to be able to get down on the floor and play with my grandkids without my back seizing up. I want to be able to lift them without fear."

✔ Positive framing established - Focus on capability, not limitation

STEP 2: Establish an Acceptable Outcome

You: "Let's get really specific. What would 'playing with your grandkids' look like?"

Sarah: "I want to be able to sit on the floor for 20 minutes playing blocks, then get up without pain. And I want to be able to lift my 3-year-old grandson—he's about 15kg—without worrying my back will go out."

✔ Specific, measurable outcome - Both parties know exactly what success looks like

STEP 3: Ensure the Goal is Under the Patient's Control

You: "These goals depend on what you do—your strength, your flexibility, your movement patterns. That's all within your control. How does that feel?"

Sarah: "That actually feels empowering. I'm not waiting for my back to magically get better—I'm actively working toward something."

✔ Patient ownership - Sarah controls the outcome through her actions

STEP 4: Gather Resources and Identify Challenges

You: "What resources do you have that could help? And what might get in the way?"

Sarah: "My husband is really supportive—he'll help me stay accountable. But honestly, time is tough. I work full-time and I'm exhausted by evening."

You: "So morning might work better?"

Sarah: "Yes, I could probably do 10 minutes before work."

✔ Resources identified (supportive husband) and barriers addressed (timing)

STEP 5: Conduct an Ecology Check

You: "If you commit to morning exercises, how does that fit with your family routine? Will it create stress elsewhere?"

Sarah: "Actually, it might help. I'm usually rushing and stressed in the mornings. Ten minutes of quiet movement before everyone wakes up sounds kind of nice."

You: "And when you achieve this—when you're playing with your grandkids pain-free—are there any downsides?"

Sarah: "None that I can think of. It's all positive."

✓ Ecology check passed - Goal fits her life and creates positive ripple effects

STEP 6: Define Evidence for Success

You: "How will you know you've succeeded?"

Sarah: "I'll be able to sit on my daughter's living room floor playing with my grandkids for 20 minutes, then stand up without needing to hold onto furniture. And I'll be able to pick up my grandson without that fear in my stomach."

You: "Perfect. That's clear evidence we can both track."

✓ Observable markers - Both parties will recognise success when it happens

STEP 7: Establish First Steps

You: "What's the first thing you'll do when you leave here today?"

Sarah: "I'll set my alarm 15 minutes earlier tomorrow morning. And I'll do the three core exercises you showed me—just those three, right after I wake up."

You: "That's your experiment for this week. We'll review how it goes next session."

✓ Immediate action - Sarah knows exactly what to do tomorrow



Quick Reference: The 7 Steps at a Glance

Use This Framework in Your Next Treatment Planning Session

1

Define What is Wanted (Positive Framing)

- Ask: "What do you want to achieve?" (not what they want to avoid)
- Focus on goals, not problems

2

Establish an Acceptable Outcome

- Ask: "What would success look like specifically?"
- Make it measurable and clear

3

Ensure the Goal is Under the Patient's Control

- Ask: "What parts of this can you directly control?"
- Focus on patient agency, not external factors

4

Gather Resources and Identify Challenges

- Ask: "What will help you? What might get in the way?"
- Identify supports and address barriers

5

Conduct an Ecology Check

- Ask: "How will this fit into your whole life?"
- Ensure the goal is sustainable

6

Define Evidence for Success

- Ask: "How will you know you've succeeded?"
- Create observable markers

7

Establish First Steps

- Ask: "What's the first thing you'll do?"
- Create immediate, achievable action

The Shift This Creates:

From:

Clinician prescribes → Patient complies (or doesn't)

To:

Patient designs → Clinician supports
→ **Patient owns**

Key Takeaways & Transform Your Practice

What Matters Most



Treatment Plans Fail When Patients Don't Own Them

Stop prescribing and start partnering. The Well-Formed Outcome model ensures patients are genuinely invested in goals they've designed themselves.



Positive Framing Changes Everything

Focus on what patients want to achieve, not what they want to avoid. This single shift makes goals more motivating and achievable.



Control = Ownership

When goals depend on what the patient can control (not external circumstances), they feel empowered rather than helpless.



Ecology Checks Prevent Sabotage

Goals that don't fit patients' lives will be abandoned. Always check how the goal impacts family, work, and overall wellbeing.



Evidence Makes Progress Visible

Clear markers of success help patients recognise their progress and stay motivated through the challenging middle phase.



First Steps Create Momentum

Don't leave patients wondering "what do I do now?" Give them a specific, achievable action to take immediately.

Continue Your Learning

Want to master collaborative treatment planning and communication approaches in your clinical practice?

I offer workshops and coaching on:

- Patient-centered goal setting using NLP principles
- Motivational interviewing and behaviour change
- Communication strategies that improve treatment adherence
- Building genuine therapeutic partnerships

[Book a discovery call](#)

Feel free to share this resource with colleagues who want to create treatment plans patients actually follow.

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