

## Medication Beliefs, Cognitive Defusion, and Valued Living in Hypertensive Patients with Varying Medication Adherence

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### Original Article

#### Abstract

**BACKGROUND:** One of the most severe problems that patients with Hypertension (HTN) face are lack of medication adherence, which is influenced by psychological factors. Thus, the current survey sought to compare medication beliefs, cognitive defusion and valued living in hypertensive patients with varying medication adherence.

**METHOD:** A cross-sectional study with 162 HTN patients from three clinics at Isfahan University of Medical Sciences was conducted in 2019. Participants completed the BMQ (Beliefs about Medicines Questionnaire), MMAS (Morisky Medication Adherence Scale), CFQ (Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire), and VLQ (Valued Living Questionnaire). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square, and analysis of variance (ANOVA).

**RESULTS:** Only 22.2% of patients scored high in medication adherence (MA). MA levels increased with age in a significant correlation ( $P=0.03$ ). ANOVA results revealed that the three MA levels (low, medium, and high) had substantial differences in both VLQ subscales (importance of person-valued living and allotted time for values;  $P=0.002$  and  $P=0.023$ ). However, no significant differences in MA levels were found in the CFQ (cognitive defusion and cognitive fusion) and BMQ subscales (specific necessity, specific concern, general overuse, and general harm).

**CONCLUSIONS:** This study discovered that a higher MA is associated with increasing age. In addition, patients with HTN who value living and devote more time to their values have higher MA.

**Keywords:** Hypertension, Medication Adherence, Medication Beliefs, Cognitive Defusion, Valued Living

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#### Introduction

Hypertension (HTN) is a common, chronic, and recurring disease that is also a significant risk factor for other conditions<sup>1</sup>. Adults in the United States had an age-adjusted hypertension prevalence of 45.4%<sup>2</sup>. In Iran, the overall prevalence of HTN was estimated to be between 23.2%<sup>3</sup> and 46.6%<sup>4</sup>. Even though HTN is the leading cause of death in industrialized countries and the most common treatable risk factor<sup>5</sup>, only 48.1%

of HTN patients in Iran were treated, and only 21.3% were controlled<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, statistical studies have revealed that blood pressure is managed in only 57% of HTN patients worldwide<sup>7</sup>.

Although appropriate pharmacotherapy can reduce symptoms, complications, and mortality rates, it imposes a healthcare burden and puts patients at risk of side effects<sup>8</sup>. Poor medication adherence (MA) is a global issue in HTN patients, with rates ranging from 10% to more than 60% in different regions.

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According to studies conducted in the United States, 30-60% of hypertensive patients do not follow their prescribed medication regimen<sup>9</sup>. Another study found that MA was low in HTN patients<sup>10</sup>. Antihypertensive medications were used by 33% of hypertensive patients in Iran<sup>11</sup>. However, Pirezadeh et al. discovered that 90% of Isfahanian patients took their medications as prescribed<sup>12</sup>. Noncompliance with treatment plans by patients will result in severe consequences, such as relapse and disability progression, necessitating immediate treatment and hospitalization<sup>13</sup>. However, MA is a significant factor in achieving normal blood pressure<sup>14</sup>.

Their beliefs determine the correct use of medications and patients' MA about the medications prescribed (referred to as medication belief, MB)<sup>15</sup>. Several studies have confirmed the link between MA and beliefs<sup>16-18</sup>. According to the findings of one study, MB, such as the dangers of drugs and concerns about drug use, were inversely related to adherence to treatment, and beliefs about the necessity of drug use increased MA<sup>17</sup>. Minaian et al. investigated the role of patients' beliefs in MA in patients with asthma, cancer, and kidney transplantation. They discovered that patients with solid opinions cooperated more with treatment regardless of disease type<sup>19</sup>.

On the other hand, individual psychological characteristics play an essential role in MA. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one psychotherapy approach used to manage the psychological factors affecting physical illnesses. It has two major components: cognitive defusion and having a valued living. People with excellent cognitive defusion can accept their unpleasant internal experiences (thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, unpleasant memories, and impulses) in such a way that they see their internal experiences as quick and part of their experience rather than pervasive and comprehensive facts that explain the individuals' entire existence<sup>20</sup>. For example, having anxiety is simply an experience of anxiety in the present moment, not a person who regards himself or herself as anxious and unable to cope with their problems. Similarly,

taking medication and having a specific disease does not imply total disability and accepting the patient role<sup>21</sup>.

On the other hand, people who are fused with internal experiences (named cognitive fusion) try to eliminate or change their unpleasant internal experiences as soon as they are formed. Not accepting and trying to control these inner experiences causes them to intensify, and the patient expends a lot of energy fighting against them, preventing the patient from moving in the direction of his/her life values<sup>20</sup>. As a result, cognitive defusion and valued living have an essential relationship with MA. Gaudiano et al. investigated the effects of valued living on MA in bipolar disorder patients with comorbid substance abuse. They discovered a link between value-action consistency and MA<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, studies have shown that greater psychological flexibility (one of its essential dimensions is cognitive defusion) is significantly associated with better MA in people with Type 1 diabetes mellitus<sup>23</sup>, HIV<sup>24</sup> chronic respiratory diseases<sup>25</sup>.

Although several studies have shown that ACT is effective in reducing HTN<sup>26-28</sup>, the role of the treatment's mechanisms of effectiveness (such as cognitive defusion and valued living) has not been specifically addressed. However, if it is discovered that people with more cognitive defusion, valued living, and MA adhere to treatment better, more effective treatments can be used for these patients. As a result, the purpose of this study was to compare medication beliefs, cognitive defusion, and valued living in hypertensive patients with varying medication adherence.

## Materials and Methods

In July and August 2019, 162 hypertensive patients visited three clinics at Isfahan University of Medical Sciences (Shahid Chamran, Alzahra, and Khorshid) for follow-up and treatment. Based on a similar study<sup>15</sup> with 95% confidence and 80% power (with standard deviations of 4 and 3.1 and a minimum score difference of 2 between individuals with

and without drug adherence), the sample size was determined to be at least 51 people in each level of commitment. We need at least 153 samples for comparison because there are three levels of commitment. The following is the sample size formula: The Isfahan University of Medical Sciences Medical Ethics Committee approved the study (IR.MUI.MED.REC.1398.219). By the Helsinki Ethics Principle, the questioner briefly explained the participants after obtaining their informed consent. They were also free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Patients with primary HTN whom a cardiologist and a nephrologist had diagnosed were selected at random equally from the clinics mentioned. The inclusion criteria were:

- 1- Primary HTN with consumption of at least one antihypertensive medication,
- 2- No medication-requiring major psychiatric illness (based on SCID-1),
- 3- Literacy (at least fifth grade),
- 4- Informed consent, and
- 5- Absence of secondary HTN (HTN in patients with diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, and various heart attacks and strokes).

The exclusion criteria were failure to complete more than 80% of the questionnaire and willingness to leave the study at any time.

Gender, education, occupation, and age were used to collect demographic information, and data on medication beliefs, medication adherence, cognitive defusion, and valued living were collected using the following four valid questionnaires:

- 1- BMQ (Beliefs about Medicines Questionnaire),
- 2- MMAS (Morisky Medication Adherence Scale),
- 3- CFQ (Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire), and
- 4- VLQ (Valued Living Questionnaire).

BMQ consists of 18 questions, assesses patients' beliefs about their medications, and is divided into two parts: 1) the BMQ-Specific (10 questions) and BMQ-General (8 questions). BMQ-Specific is divided into subscales (specific necessity and specific concern). So the BMQ-specific evaluates beliefs about the necessity of prescribed medication and concerns about

prescribed medication based on assumptions about the dangers of dependence and long-term toxicity and disruptive effects of the drug. The BMQ-General has two subscales (general overuse and general harm). So, the BMQ-General evaluates beliefs that medicines are harmful, addictive poisons that should not be taken continuously and that doctors overuse medicines. Each item was graded on a five-point Likert response scale (1= strongly disagree, 3= uncertain, 5= strongly agree)<sup>29</sup>. The Iranian version was reliable in patients with kidney disorders (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.71$ )<sup>18</sup>. Morisky et al. created eight MMAS items to assess patients' medication adherence, which includes seven yes/no questions and a five-point Likert-type scale<sup>30</sup>. The scores of 8, 6-7, and 0-5 indicate high, intermediate, and poor adherence, respectively. Mohammad et al. confirmed the validity and reliability of the Iranian version. (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.697$ )<sup>31</sup>. Gillanders et al. presented the CFQ, which has 13 items and is divided into two parts: cognitive fusion and defusion. It is scored on seven points Likert scale<sup>32</sup>. Zare et al. investigated the validity and reliability of cognitive fusion and defusion (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.76$  and  $0.85$ , respectively)<sup>33</sup>.

Wilson et al. developed the VLQ, a two-part instrument to assess valued living or how much time each person was allotted for values (each part has ten items). The first section uses 10 points Likert scale to measure the importance of ten valuable domains of life (such as parenting, friendly relationships, and work). The second section uses 10 points Likert scale to determine how much time a person spends addressing each of their valuable domains<sup>34</sup>. Akbari et al. agreed that the Iranian version was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.76$ )<sup>35</sup>. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data in SPSS-24 (frequency tables, central indices, and dispersion). The Chi-square test was then used to determine the effects of qualitative variables on medication adherence. Also, ANOVA was used to assess the relationship between medication adherence and the quality variables. The significance level in all tests was  $<0.05$ .

## Results

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the patients.

The Chi-square test was used to determine the effects of qualitative variables on medication adherence.

In participants with low, medium, and high MA, the mean scores and  $\pm$ standard deviation were  $3.102 \pm 1.04$ ,  $5.97 \pm 0.82$  and  $8 \pm 0.001$  respectively. The MA level did not have a significant relationship with gender, occupation, or education ( $P > 0.05$ ), but it did increase

significantly with age ( $P = 0.03$ ) (Table 2).

ANOVA was used to compare quantitative variables in three MA groups (low, medium, and high). Table 3 shows that the three MA levels differ significantly in both VLQ subscales (importance of person-valued living and allotted time for values;  $P = 0.002$  and  $P = 0.023$ ). However, no significant differences in the other variables (cognitive defusion, cognitive fusion, specific necessity, specific concern, general overuse, and general harm;  $P$ -values = 0.640, 0.676, 0.103, 0.956, 0.439,

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of patients with hypertension

Variable	Number (Percent %)	
Age group	50>	15(9.3%)
	50-60	45(27.8%)
	60-70	64(39.5%)
	70<	38(23.4%)
Sex	Male	60(37.0%)
	Female	102(63.0%)
Work	Freelance job	23(14.2%)
	Employee	5(3.10%)
	Housekeeper	98(60.5%)
	Retired	36(22.2%)
Education	High school and above	37(22.8%)
	Below high school	125(77.2%)
Medication adherence	High	36(22.2%)
	Medium	77(47.6%)
	Low	49(30.2%)

**Table 2.** Qualitative variables and levels of medication adherence

Variable	Medication adherence			P Value	
	High	Medium	Low		
Age group	50>	0(0)	8(10.4)	7(14.3)	0.030
	50-60	7(19.4)	25(32.5)	13(26.5)	
	60-70	15(41.7)	26(33.8)	23(46.9)	
	70<	14(38.9)	18(23.3)	6(12.2)	
Sex	Male	15(41.7)	27(35.1)	18(36.7)	0.794
	Female	21(58.3)	50(64.9)	31(63.3)	
Work	Freelance job	4(11.1)	11(14.3)	8(16.3)	0.701
	Employee	0(0)	3(3.90)	2(4.10)	
	Housekeeper	21(58.3)	46(59.7)	31(63.3)	
	Retired	11(30.6)	17(22.1)	8(16.3)	
Education	High school and above	9(25.0)	15(19.5)	13(26.5)	0.617
	Below high school	27(75.0)	62(80.5)	36(73.5)	

All data were reported as absolute number (percent)

and 0.326, respectively) were observed in various groups of MA.

**Table 3.** Means, standard deviations, and comparisons of the CFQ, BMQ, and VLQ subscales in various levels of medication adherence

Variable	Medication adherence	Number	Average	Variance	p Value
Cognitive defusion	High	36	9.78	6.39	0.64
	Medium	77	10.50	4.31	
	Low	49	10.7	4.53	
Cognitive fusion	High	36	31.2	18.0	0.67
	Medium	77	31.9	12.6	
	Low	49	33.7	12.2	
Specific necessity	High	36	7.83	2.90	0.10
	Medium	77	8.08	2.97	
	Low	49	9.10	3.23	
Specific concern	High	36	12.88	2.90	0.95
	Medium	77	12.98	2.47	
	Low	49	12.83	3.25	
General overuse	High	36	11.2	3.30	0.43
	Medium	77	10.9	2.57	
	Low	49	10.4	3.08	
General harm	High	36	12.5	3.41	0.32
	Medium	77	12.0	2.48	
	Low	49	11.6	2.43	
Importance of person-valued living	High	36	73.4	15.7	0.012
	Medium	77	79.5	11.9	
	Low	49	73.0	13.5	
allotted time for values	High	36	72.2	15.9	0.030
	Medium	77	77.0	12.9	
	Low	49	68.2	13.9	

## Discussion

The current study compared medication beliefs, cognitive deficiency, and valued living in hypertensive patients with varying medication adherence.

According to the findings, most participants (nearly 80%) did not have a high MA. Many studies found that HTN patients received less MA than was necessary<sup>9-11</sup>. Unlike our study, Pirzadeh et al. found that 90% of patients took their medications as prescribed<sup>12</sup>.

These statistical differences can be attributed to patients' sensitivity to MA and their ignorance of the significant lowering effect of medications on blood pressure. Physicians and other healthcare providers should educate patients on the benefits and importance of taking medications as directed.

Only the age qualitative variable was associated with MA in this study. This association implies that younger patients had low MA. According to Oori et al., older adults have a higher MA prevalence than other age groups<sup>11</sup>. Another study found that MA was higher in patients over 50 than in patients under 50 and that age was a precise predictor of MA in HTN patients<sup>36</sup>. In contrast to our findings, Gast et al. demonstrated that age might have a concave relationship with MA. The lowest rate of MA is seen in very young and very old patients<sup>37</sup>.

There was no statistically significant difference between the various levels of MA and the BMQ specific-necessity subscale. Although many studies found substantial

differences between MB and multiple levels of MA or an essential relationship between MB and MA<sup>15-19</sup>, Tiffe et al.<sup>38</sup> found no meaningful relationship between blood pressure control and BMQ specific-necessity subscale. This result is consistent with this study.

There could be a connection between the need to take prescribed medication and the presence or absence of symptoms. The benefits may be imperceptible when participants suffer from a predominantly asymptomatic condition, such as hypertension. As a result, it is difficult for physicians to advise hypertensive patients to take their medication as directed because they tend to underestimate the long-term benefits of medication adherence. Furthermore, in a mainly asymptomatic condition, medication-related side effects may be perceived as more readily unacceptable<sup>39</sup>.

Our findings show no differences in cognitive defusion and fusion between the three groups of MA patients. ACT-related variables have recently been studied in the treatment of medical diseases. As a result, each factor was not examined separately. For example, studies have suggested that psychological flexibility (which, in addition to cognitive defusion and valued living, measures four other variables simultaneously) plays a role in MA<sup>23-25</sup>. Therefore, more research is required to demonstrate the specific part of the cognitive defusion variable in MA.

Finally, there were significant differences between valued living (in both subscales of VLQ) in three levels of MA in the current study, indicating that those who better understand their disease adhere to the treatment regimen more closely and are less likely to suffer from disease complications. In addition, people who pay attention to the critical aspects of their lives believe that their health status is under their control. Therefore, they feel more responsible for their health and are more committed to their treatment<sup>40</sup>. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as that of Gaudiano et al.<sup>22</sup>.

The current study had the limitation of being a comparative study. Hence, it could not demonstrate a solid cause-and-effect relationship between the variables, and the self-

assessment data obtained did not accurately reflect the participants' actual performance.

### Conclusion

This study revealed the role of age and valued living in MA in hypertensive patients, which warrants further investigation. It has also been demonstrated that valued living can help increase MA in patients with chronic diseases. Because many psychological variables influence therapeutic adherence, directly and indirectly, structural equation modeling studies are recommended to determine the role of additional psychological variables. Furthermore, given the specific role of cognitive defusion on the rate of MA in the current study, it is suggested that future experimental research focus on applying cognitive defusion techniques to evaluate their effectiveness on MA in HTN and other medical diseases.

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### Conflict of Interest

This study's authors reported no conflicts of interest.

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