

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT FIDELITY AND ADAPTATION

What is fidelity?

Just like in marriage, fidelity is about being faithful. In this context, fidelity is about staying faithful to the way the developer of the program wanted it to be implemented. That would normally mean using all of the recommended program components, doing them in the correct order, getting the appropriate training, etc.

What is adaptation?

Adaptations are changes made to a program that vary from the developer's original guidelines. Adaptations might include adding some content, removing a component that you think might not work for your target population, changing the delivery setting, etc.

Why is fidelity important?

Evidence-based programs are valued most because they have shown positive outcomes through a rigorous evaluation. As with all evaluation, however, those results apply only to that particular implementation that was evaluated. If the program is not implemented the same way each time, the likelihood of those outcomes being achieved again is decreased. To the extreme, the question might be, "If you don't maintain perfect fidelity with an evidence-based program, then how can you call what you are doing evidence-based?"

Should perfect fidelity be my goal?

First of all, perfect fidelity isn't really possible. Something will always be different about each implementation, even if it just different program participants. Fidelity can be a goal, but it will never be perfect. There are also times when the need for an adaptation outweighs the importance of keeping fidelity. For example, if the program materials are written in a way that you are certain will not be understood by the participants, then you must make some adaptations. Some adaptations will not be planned but cannot be avoided like a fire drill interrupting a lesson and causing some content to be lost from the program.

What are core components?

Core components refers to those elements of the program that are most central to the effectiveness of the program. These should be the least likely areas to receive major adaptations. Some developers identify core components of their programs, but few have had the type of research necessary to definitively identify them. There is a great deal of interest in this type of research, and some of it is now being conducted. However, there will never be enough research to answer whether every potential adaptation will be harmful to outcomes or not.

Do program developers care if I implement their program with fidelity?

Evidence-based program developers vary a great deal on this. Some are very accepting of the need for local adaptation and support those changes. Some advise against virtually any change and remind practitioners that the program can no longer guarantee the results it promotes if changes are made. Some take a middle ground where they might support dropping an entire component but not the specific content within the component, or vice-versa. At least one developer advocates trying your first implementation with no adaptations then making only those adaptations that were shown to be necessary. You should ask each developer for their view on adaptations. Some of them may even be able to advise you on what types of adaptations have been shown to not hurt outcomes.

Does better fidelity mean better outcomes?

There is a lot of research currently being done on this question, but some early indications are yes and no. One CSAP study demonstrated that better fidelity did lead to better outcomes, but even better results were achieved when core components were maintained while the program was culturally tailored in appropriate ways.

Does the importance of fidelity extend to the use of the program's pre- and post-test?

No, evaluation tools are a separate issue from the program itself. Not using the evaluation tool that comes with a program does not affect the program's outcomes or your adherence to its fidelity.

Is there a process for helping me decide whether to make an adaptation?

Thomas Backer, Ph.D., one of the most active researchers in this area, has developed a 12-step process for making decisions on fidelity vs. adaptation concerns (http://captus.samhsa.gov/northeast/PDF/fidladap_NECAPT_telecon.pdf), but it is quite involved. Some of the key steps in the process are including community members, analyzing the core components of the program, consulting with the developer, and developing a plan for each adaptation. Even if the full process is not utilized, it should serve as a reminder that these decisions are important and should be made in advance whenever possible.