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Provider Empathy in Patient Care

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Empathy in Clinical Practice: Connecting

When facing physical or emotional distress, people seek relief. Within this drive to restore health, they desire empathy from their caregiver.

Empathy: Definitions

- Empathy as a concept is viewed differently within the field of healthcare – empathy is described within the context of detachment**
- The Society for General Internal Medicine defines empathy as “the act of correctly acknowledging the emotional state of another without experiencing that state oneself”**

Empathy: Intellectual vs Emotional

- **The Society for General Internal Medicine definition assumes that experiencing the emotion of the experience is unimportant for understanding what a patient is feeling**
- **Empathy is viewed as intellectual, rather than an emotional form of knowing, to gain insight into the process of coping**

Empathy: Intellectual vs Emotional

- **The concern raised is that the provider will over-identify with the patient/client**
- **The “neutrally empathetic” provider will do what needs to be done without feeling grief, regret, or other difficult emotions**

Empathy: Definitions

- **By eliminating the provider's emotional reaction, they are seen as being able to "see into" and "study" the patient's "inner processes" to allow for prediction and intervention**
- **This definition contrasts markedly with the common meaning of empathy as "feeling into or being moved by another's suffering"**

Empathy as Detachment

- **In their classic 1963 article, "Training for Detached Concern," Fox and Lief describe how physicians believe that the same detachment that enables medical students to dissect a cadaver without disgust allows them to listen empathically without becoming emotionally involved**

Fox R, Lief H. Training for "detached concern." In: Lief H, editor, The Psychological Basis of Medical Practice. New York, NY: Harper & Row; 1963

Empathy in Clinical Practice

- **The problem with this detached orientation is that “one attempts to think through a feeling”**
- **The function of empathy is not simply to categorize feelings, but to acknowledge how the experience is felt by the other person**

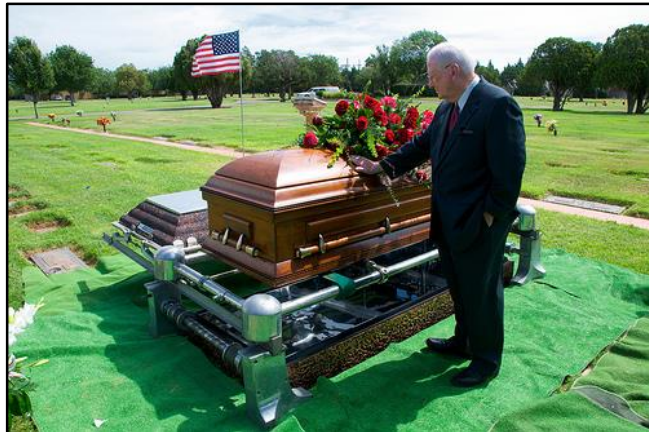
Words vs Meaning

- **“There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics” – Mark Twain**
- **The definition of words is not within a dictionary, but rather is found in ourselves – the same can be said of feelings**
- **Much like how we can hear a song and find both common, as well as unique meaning**

Words vs Meaning

- What is the feeling you experienced in listening?
- How would you describe the action in the music? Is something happening? Has something already happened?

Words vs Meaning



- What happens next?

Nonverbal Attunement and Empathy

- **Empathy does not require the provider vicariously experience and introspect about the other person's emotions – the primary point is to focus attention on the other person**

Nonverbal Attunement and Empathy

- **Emotional attunement operates by shaping how one views the other person's experience**
- **Attuning to others is a subtle, nonverbal sense of where another person is emotionally**
- **The challenge is to use skilled attunement in multiple, rapid, ordinary clinical interactions**

Nonverbal Attunement and Empathy

- For example, if a person says that she has stopped taking her medication, we look to understand how she might view the side effects, her own emotional distress, or if she is seeing the medication as unnecessary
- How one addresses the situation depends upon attuning to the person's emotions

Associative Reasoning and Empathy

- Words having meaning, particularly in emotional attunement
- Emotions guide thought by linking one idea to another in an “associative” way
- Learn to listen to terms we use such as DISorder, DISease, DISability

Empathy Facilitates Trust and Disclosure

- **Providers who express empathy not only investigate the personal meanings of patients' words by matching patients' nonverbal style**
- **Growing research evidence suggesting that empathy directly enhances therapeutic efficacy**

Recognizing Another's Emotional State

- **Empathy is an experiential way of seeking to understand another's emotional state**
- **It is an external emotional activity that operates alongside logical inquiry**
- **Empathy enhances the delivery of healthcare and improves doctor/patient communication and trust**

Barriers to Empathy

- **Anxiety and stress can interfere with empathy**
- **Limited time can be a barrier to listening and being curious about the person's experience**

Barriers to Empathy

- **Providers may have difficulty in acknowledging or seeking support for their own emotional needs care**
- **Providers may not see patients' emotional needs as a core aspect of illness and care**

Teaching Programs in Empathy

- **Programs such as at Columbia University School of Medicine have pioneered “narrative medicine” which emphasizes the importance of understanding patient life stories in providing compassionate care**

Teaching Programs in Empathy

- **The focus is on self-monitoring to reduce defensiveness, and improve listening skills and decoding facial expressions and body language**

Empathic Behaviors

- Listen and be curious
- Maintain eye contact
- Don't stand over a hospitalized patient, pull up a chair
- Reflect back what you hear the person saying
- Learn to "translate" what feelings you label and how the person labels these
- Don't have a conversation in off-putting "medicalese"

Healing Illness, Fighting Disease

- Partnering with others to bring a sense of community to a problem
- Returning to the role of healer to others we share life with
- Respect for how people construct their "reality of illness"

Empathy in Clinical Practice

“It is not reality that troubles us, it is how we look at reality.”

– Aristotle

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