

**THE NEED FOR EMPATHETIC CARE IN THE
HEALTHCARE SYSTEM IS ESSENTIAL TO BUILD
PATIENT-PHYSICIAN RELATIONSHIPS: A SYSTEMATIC
REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Patient happiness is a crucial aspect of healthcare that is frequently undervalued and oversimplified. Each patient has unique requirements that must be met. It is important that healthcare professionals respect patients' concerns and feelings about their care and treatment. Respect is a critical element of a high-performance healthcare team. It contributes to the development of a positive environment where patients feel respected as people, and staff can thrive in their care. In a setting where respect is valued, people perform better, are more creative, and show strong resilience. What one patient experiences or understands, another patient can feel very differently. It is necessary for healthcare providers to view their patients as more than just a source of earnings. Healthcare professionals must approach each patient with an awareness of their uniqueness and the goal of establishing a working relationship; this makes the experience for both the patient and the healthcare provider much more pleasant. To achieve a shared objective, a provider-patient relationship needs to be characterized by open communication and mutual trust. Furthermore, there is a lack of awareness of the value of compassionate care throughout the healthcare system, which would benefit both patients and healthcare professionals. Therefore, the goal of this study is to investigate the boundaries of appropriate empathy and communication between a healthcare provider and their patient. The findings of this study will help us understand patient experiences when there is increased empathetic communication between patients and healthcare professionals.

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Introduction

The most important skill for a healthcare professional is clear communication. Clear communication depends on the clinician being confident that they have effectively heard and acknowledged the patients' needs to deliver excellent patient care. To accurately assess patients' needs and respond accordingly through providing customized care, healthcare professionals must have a thorough understanding of patients' feelings and experiences. Building empathetic skills are essential to achieving that goal. Empathy is a common idea that healthcare professionals share. Nurses, social workers, physicians, and anesthesiologists are all professions where empathy is applied to care on different scales. The role of empathy among healthcare professionals is defined differently throughout the healthcare system.

Moudatsou et., (2020), defines empathy as a three-dimensional concept. “In a qualitative research study, nurse students, who were asked their opinion on empathy, emphasized the three dimensions of the concept. Participants described it as the nurse’s ability to understand and experience other people’s feelings, thoughts, and wishes, as well as the nurse’s capacity to comprehend the emotional and cognitive state of the person they work with. To sum up, empathy is perceived as a combination of the emotional, cognitive, and practical skills involved when caring for a patient” (p.3).

Background/Significance

According to Moudatsou et al. (2020) empathy is one of the fundamental tools of the therapeutic relationship between the caregiver and their patients and it has been proven that its contribution is vital to better health outcomes. This enhances the growth and development of the therapeutic relationship between the two parties by enabling the medical professionals to identify and understand the users' experiences, concerns, and opinions. It is widely acknowledged that the

health professional's empathetic ability can lead to better treatment results. Patients who have experienced empathic treatment from medical staff in the past have reported improvements in their moods, attitudes, and ailments. The ability to empathize with one another has a significant impact on how patients and healthcare personnel interact, in addition to how they are treated.

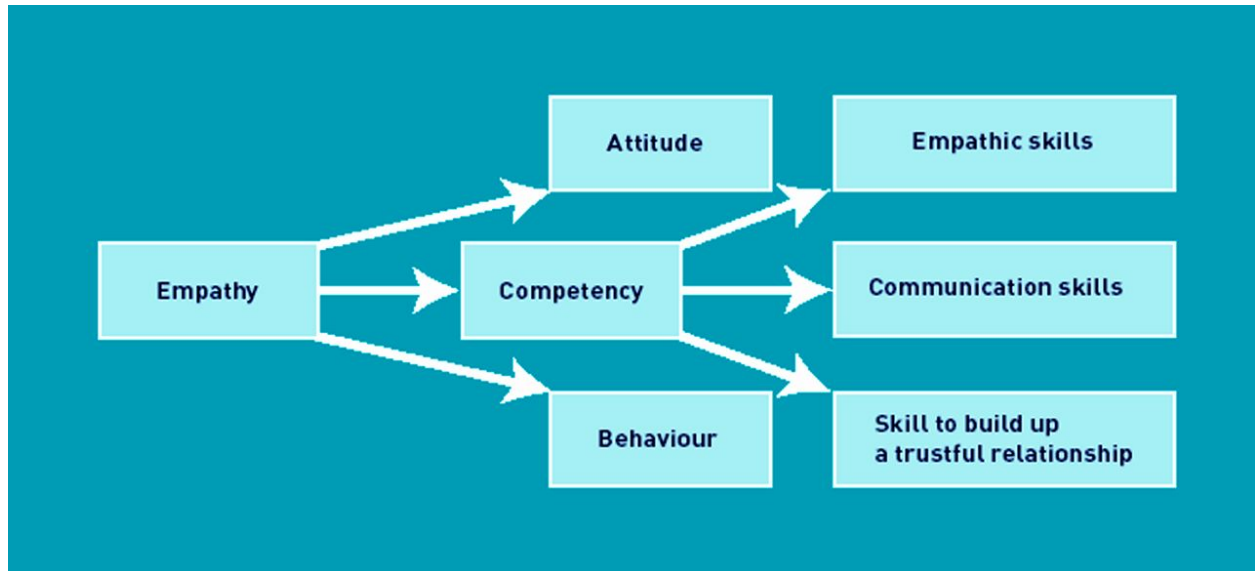
What is clinical empathy?

Understanding what a patient says and feels, as well as properly transmitting this understanding to the patient, is referred to as clinical empathy. By getting a clear understanding of how the phrase is used universally through healthcare facilities, we can better understand norms surrounding behavioral interactions that directly affect the experiences of patients and physicians. According to Rohani, Kesbakhi, and Mohtashami (2021), "There is still no widely accepted definition for empathy in the area of medical sciences. Some scholars define empathy as a cognitive ability to acquire the perspectives, perception of thoughts, intentions, affections, and beliefs of others" (p.2). It is important to understand the differences between words like sympathy and compassion while analyzing the idea of empathy in order to study and describe it. There is a thin line between empathy and maintaining a professional standpoint. As stated by Moudatsou & Stavropoulou (2021), clinicians are aware of empathetic care. It is the implementation in care that is difficult to execute. "Although research has shown the value of empathy, there are still many difficulties in regard to its implementation in clinical practice. A relatively high percentage of health professionals, about 70%, find it difficult to develop empathy with their health care users" (p.4).

A few factors that affect the execution of empathy are age, emotional states, and self-reflection. In addition, Empathy revolves around a patient-centered care approach. The patient-centered care involves the approach to healthcare that puts patients in charge. When

patients play an active role in their care, they are empowered, and results improve.

Patient-centered care reduces unnecessary procedures, honors patient preferences, and improves patient health overall.



(Derksen et al., 2013 *Effectiveness of empathy in general practice: A systematic review*)

Figure 1. Empathy and the factors that contribute to the overall definition of empathy.

Nurse curriculum empathy and communication?

Nurses make up the majority of the healthcare team. They share equal responsibility with the rest of the healthcare team in delivering high-quality care to the patients. According to a study by Bakker (2022, as cited by Rosenberg 1998 & 2003) “Nonviolent or empathic communication’, described as ‘connecting communication’, was developed by Rosenberg and Molho (1998) and Rosenberg (2003) to build personal and professional relationships grounded in mutual respect, compassion, and emotional safety through empathic listening, using a conversation technique in a four-step process” (p.2).

Communication in nursing is an essential part of the nursing career path. With proper communication, conflict and miscommunications can be reduced. No one enjoys spending time

in the hospital and being away from home. Patients are there because they have health problems, sometimes significant ones. Nearly everyone, including the patient's loved ones and family, find that stressful. The urge to express stress, anxiety and irritation will arise from time to time for the patients and their loved ones. Nurses are at the front line of care for patients, they are the ones who receive the emotions of the patients and their families. Due to the benefits to both patient and practitioner, it is universally recommended that nursing curricula contain the concepts of empathy and compassion.

Empathy and compassion come easily for some while others feel the emotions but have a difficult time expressing them. Having empathy included in the nursing curriculum allows nursing students to express empathy and compassion on a professional level. Additionally, it will provide nursing students who have trouble expressing their empathy the chance to learn more about it and its varied expressions until they discover a method that works for them.

Nursing students in particular encounter hostility and prejudice during their clinical experiences due to their lack of experience, ability to adjust rapidly, and capacity to endure an uncomfortable environment. High levels of health concerns, work overload, social isolation, and a lack of job involvement are all contributing factors that lead to decreases in nurse retention rates. Including empathy in the curriculum will strengthen nursing students' communication skills. An effective educational intervention would be training in nonviolent communication to enhance interactions with patients, families, clinical supervisors, and nursing. Additionally, the training would help in minimizing and managing conflicts.

According to Baker et al. (2022) "Connecting communication contributes to an important aspect of nursing work called 'emotional labour', which means managing the emotional demands of relating with patients, family, and colleagues. It supports important aspects of emotion

regulation, such as i) conscious processing and being aware of emotions, ii) identifying and labeling emotions, and iii) accepting and tolerating emotions (Berking et al., 2008; Torre and Lieberman, 2018)”, (p.2). Building trusting connections with patients and families in stressful conditions requires nursing students to learn to manage their own emotions, identify others' feelings, and refrain from taking patients' emotional expressions personally. The inclusion of empathy in the curriculum would be beneficial, teaching nurses to anticipate empathetic behavior and exhibit them as well.

Hostage Bargaining Syndrome

Patients experience hostage bargaining syndrome (HBS) as a result of the discomfort they feel in the presence of clinicians who are experts. Hostage bargaining syndrome is a reluctance to challenge people in authority. In the medical field, this can appear as a patient who is acting out of helplessness, fear, or confusion. When this occurs, patients frequently remain silent even when they disagree with the choices their doctor has made regarding their health. Patients are hesitant to voice concerns or objections when under the care of healthcare professionals because they are hesitant to offend them or receive inadequate care. According to Berry et al. (2017), “It is especially prevalent when, as clinical conditions deteriorate and the stakes of health decisions rise, patients become more dependent on clinicians and more likely to seek favor from them in a differential manner. They believe that “the doctor knows best” and conform to a socially sanctioned role of reluctance to assert their interests in the presence of experts” (p.1374).

There are numerous situations when a patient could easily hold the hostage title. When things are going as planned in a clinical environment, patients and their families are less likely to develop hostage bargaining syndrome. Patients only begin to feel obligated and bound by a doctor's decisions when something goes wrong, or the patient's health begins to worsen. Due to

extreme stress, anxiety, and terror, HBS can cause patients and their families to accept and commit to things they wouldn't usually accept. For instance, if a patient is advised to continue taking medications that have negative side effects, they might do so because the doctor advised them to. The hostage in the healthcare system is more often the victim of poor communication, overcomplicated procedures, and poor practices rather than the target of malicious intent. In relation to healthcare, the term "hostage" is rarely used. It serves to express the intense feelings that a patient could have under stressful circumstances. The implications that arise from HBS lead to miscommunication, negative patient-doctor relationships, and inaccurate patient feedback. "When patients feel inhibited from participating in their care, clinicians may misread the behavior as disengagement or lack of interest, thereby eroding trust. This dysfunctional relationship may make patients less likely to adhere to medical recommendations and may contribute to misdiagnoses (because of poor symptom reporting), unnecessary pain and suffering, diminished quality of life and well-being, or even loss of life" (Berry, et al. 2017, p.1377). In addition, shared decision-making (SDM) between patients and physicians is a great start to preventing the development or worsening of HBS. SDM encourages the patient's self-knowledge, values, and experiences as well as the clinician's knowledge and expertise while both sides collaborate to achieve the desired health outcome. Ultimately, patients will have a more comfortable experience and healthcare professionals will truly feel like they are making a difference if there is a strong sense of partnership between the patient and the healthcare professional.

Finally, it can be challenging to alter the social norm where patients feel powerless during doctor visits. Giving patients confidence in their interaction with a clinician and overcoming the cultural foundations of HBS requires trust, communication, and compassion. According to Berry,

et al. (2017), “To gain trust, a cornerstone of SDM, clinicians need to demonstrate compassion. Because patients may not be able to gauge competence, compassion may be used by patients as a surrogate marker of competence” (p. 1378). Compassion must be a part of care because it creates room for a developing connection. To conclude, it is important to analyze problems and solutions within the healthcare field between the patient and healthcare professional. Berry et al. (2017), states, “It is essential to disentangle precisely how barriers in the clinician-patient relationship contribute, directly or indirectly, to negative health outcomes. Hostage bargaining syndrome, an insidious psychosocial dynamic whereby patients feel disempowered in relation to the medical experts who care for them, is always depleting and sometimes potentially dangerous” (p.1378).

Use of the media and its impact on patient-physician trust during COVID-19

Many people's mental health problems began to manifest during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, and those that already existed got worse. After learning about the COVID-19 outbreak through media sources, many people's anxiety and worry increased. When an unexpected event occurs, people frequently look to the media for useful information to help them deal with the news. The media has a significant impact on the connection between a patient's and a physician's perspectives and feelings. “According to the theory of public opinion communication, the way in which medical news is disseminated has a crucial impact on the physician–patient relationship (Sun & Wang, 2019 as cited by Chen et al., 2022, p.3).

Previous studies have revealed different opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using social media for news consumption. Some researchers argue that the media is a good news outlet only when things are portrayed well. However, media outlets may be perceived as negative if they convey negative or uncertain information. Reports of health issues can have a negative impact directly on physician-patient trust. This has a close relationship to the

information that the media publicizes and the perspective from which it does so. The knowledge and ethics of both individuals must be acknowledged in order to rebuild trust and empathy between a patient and a physician. Despite the high level of stress and the risk of infection, healthcare workers kept working on the front lines. Media outlets emphasized healthcare workers' heroic actions. The media's transformation of medical personnel into "heroes" made a significant impact on patients and their thoughts on their interactions with healthcare professionals. Patient trust in doctors can increase if the media portrays healthcare professionals as capable, compassionate, and honest. Patients' kindness, competence, and morality must be seen by physicians as a priority if the doctor-patient relationship is to be restored.

In times of public health emergencies, the media is vital for rousing the community, disseminating reliable information, distributing resources, and encouraging community stability. Additionally, it has been observed that increased media use is linked with an increase in social trust. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, society as a whole needed to address the issue of patient trust, and the fractured doctor-patient relationship was pushing doctors and patients in different directions. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed weaknesses in the healthcare system and gave rise to possibilities for repairing the doctor-patient relationship. According to Chen's study (2022), the way social media presents news is significant and directly affects the interaction between the patient and the doctor. A reduction in trust might occur as a result of patient-framed reporting, which would automatically cast patients as the ingroup and physicians as the outgroup. Ultimately, if the media covered a health-related topic primarily from the viewpoint of a healthcare professional, enabling patients the chance to change their perspective and see things from a doctor's perspective, it could potentially change patients' unfavorable perceptions of doctors' actions.

Methods

A systematic review of literature was conducted which includes peer-reviewed scholarly research articles with publication dates between 2017 to 2022. The articles were found using the CINAHL, MEDLINE, and EBSCO databases. Eight articles met the criteria for inclusion in this systematic review of literature. The articles consisted of both qualitative and quantitative research. The keywords searched were as follows: *patient doctor, empathetic healthcare, compassion, medical ethics, health literacy, healthcare professional*.

Discussion

A definition of empathy from the standpoint of a clinician was included in this study. According to Moudatsou et al. (2020) “Empathy is the ability to understand and share other people’s feelings [10]. It is a core concept as, according to the psychodynamic, behavioral and person-centered approaches, it facilitates the development of a therapeutic relationship with the health care user, providing the basis for therapeutic change [11]” (p.2). This study is one of an increasing amount of literature studies that emphasize the need to provide empathetic patient care with a focus on nurses and doctors in particular.

Additionally, the study demonstrates the many benefits empathic care has for both patients and healthcare professionals. As stated by Moudatsou et al. (2020) “The empathetic relationship between a midwife and a future mother increases the latter’s satisfaction and lessens the stress, the agony, and the pain of the forthcoming labor as the mother feels security, trust, and encouragement [37]. It has been shown that physicians who have higher levels of empathy experience less burnout or depression [39,40]” (p.3). The findings of this study have given insight on the critical advantages and requirements of developing a strong partnership with one's physician. The importance and application of empathetic care have been emphasized.

Limitations

Research on empathy published within the span of the last five years is very limited. When reflecting on the limitations of this review, it is important to note that most of the studies did not use a universal system to define clinical empathy and/or empathy. The lack of general patient research raises difficulty when comparing the delivery and differences in empathy offered by physicians and nurses. Since there is no universal understanding or definition of clinical empathy, it is difficult to understand and apply it to research. To improve the research, a universal definition should be created and taught to healthcare professionals to incorporate empathy in patient care.

Conclusion

It is suggested additional research on this subject be conducted. Additional findings of this study will be helpful to other researchers, healthcare professionals, and patients. Policies and practices can be implemented in the healthcare systems in response to this research. This systematic review of the literature demonstrates evidence that supports the idea that the need for empathy in the healthcare system is essential to building a healthcare-provider relationship. This research can enhance the curriculum of healthcare professionals in terms of empathic care implementation and widespread application. Professional empathetic relationship with patients is a goal that healthcare providers should strive for. When patients feel more comfortable with their healthcare provider it develops a higher level of trust. After a patient's treatment, empathy should be one of the key components of care. The information from this review should emphasize the need for empathetic treatment. It not only enables the patient to feel at ease, but it also creates trust in the healthcare professional's skills.

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