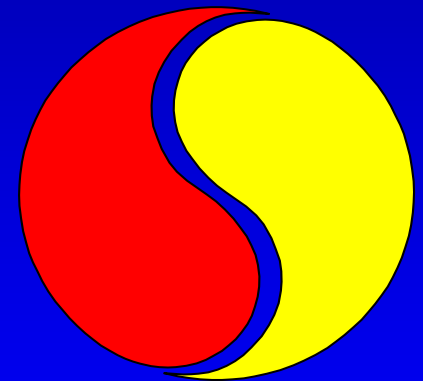


Using Literature to Help Understand and Work with Difficult Patients



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Aspects of Difficult Patients

- **"Heartsink" patients**
- **Presence of psychological disorders, esp. personality disorders**
- **Presence of somatization**
- **Presence of addictions, drug-seeking**
- **Demanding, entitled, hostile**
- **Noncompliant, don't take responsibility**
- **Hard-to-diagnose/treat complaints**

Any Patient Can Be "Difficult"

- **Prejudiced or racist patient**
- **Worried well**
- **Dying patient**
- **Geriatric patient**
- **Culturally/linguistically different patient**

Effects of Difficult Patients on Physicians

- Frustration
- Anger
- Exasperation
- Defeat
- Helplessness/despair
- Cynicism
- Patient blame

Potential Effects of Using Literature to Improve Relationships with Difficult Patients

- Gain insights into difficult physician-patient relationship
- Increase empathy for patients perceived as difficult
- Understand own emotional responses
- Develop additional problem-solving strategies for dealing with difficult physician-patient encounters

Basic Orientation Questions

- **Who is the speaker?**
- **What is the point of view?**
- **What is happening?**
- **What is the tone of the poem?**

Thematic Questions

- **What is the selection saying?**
- **What is the basic idea of the selection?**
- **How would you interpret the message or point of this selection?**
- **Other points of view?**

Emotional Response/ Empathy Questions

- What is the narrator (and other characters) feeling about his/her/their situation?
- If you did not like the narrator, other characters etc., are there any circumstances under which you could feel more sympathetic to him/her/them?
- What would this story be like from the point of view of one of the other characters?
- Did you like or dislike this selection? Why?

Credibility Questions

Is this passage or poem true to human experience?

Is it credible? Does it make sense?

Clinical Implications

- What message can you take back to clinical practice from this selection?
- What did it teach you that might be relevant to dealing with difficult patients?
- How would you feel about being this person's physician?
- If you were this person's physician, how would you try to act? What might you say and do?
- What have you learned about yourself as a physician from reading this selection?

Second Thoughts

It's five o' five
day's almost done.
All the patients seen
but one.

I stand outside
the exam room door,
read the nurse's note
with horror.

"New patient says
teeth itch at night,
stomach aches when shoes
too tight.

"Numbness starting
In the knee,
dizziness
Since '63.

"Food goes up
instead of down,
always tired,
Lies around..."

Tears start to fall.
I just can't hide 'em.
The note goes on
Ad infinitum:

**“...climbing stairs
causes gas,
no sense of smell
when driving fast.**

**“Left hand hurts
and right hand’s weak
sneeze sends pain
from hands to feet.**

**“Last week had
a pain in chest...”
Stop! No more!
Can’t read the rest!**

**I think business school
would have been wiser,
‘cause they don’t have
somaticizers.**

- Tillman Farley, M.D.



Personal Writing as a Tool for Professional Development

- **Research with patient populations shows writing is associated with:**
 - Reduced physical symptoms
 - Improved psychological health
- **Research with normal populations shows writing is associated with:**
 - Better immune function
 - Decreased physician visits
 - Improved wellbeing

Personal Writing as a Tool for Professional Development

- **Theoretical model suggests writing is beneficial because it:**
 - Counteracts helplessness, promotes active reflection
 - Creates understanding and coherence
 - Helps us discover alternative or complementary meanings and points of view
 - Can result in resolution and moving on
- **Celebration of pivotal events**

*When I'm having trouble with a
patient, when I feel I'm not doing
the right thing,
I write a story from the patient's
point of view*

- Rita Charon, M.D., Ph.D.

Point of View Writing: Definition

- Adopts the patient's (family member's) point of view
- Describes key life events and/or physician-patient encounters.

Point of View Writing: Technique

- **Select a patient on basis of perceived difficulty or highly charged affect**
- **Commit to 10 minutes of writing time**
- **Write in the first person voice (“I”), relating the patient’s perspective, thoughts, feelings about a recent physician-patient encounter, illness episode, or other major life event**
- **Use information actually known about the patient from past encounters, but also try to imagine aspects of the patient’s life that are unknown**

Point of View Writing: Purpose

- To develop increased understanding of and empathy for the patient's situation.
- To encourage playful, imaginative, and creative thinking about patients
- To stimulate compassionate curiosity about and greater appreciation for patients
- To decrease feelings of frustration, irritation, anger, and helplessness toward patients
- To develop innovative strategies for patient interaction and management

QUESTIONS???

