

EMPATHY: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO GET IT (BUT NOT TOO MUCH OF IT)

SLIDE: EMPATHY DEFINITION

Empathy: the ability to understand and feel another's perspective, concerns, and experience
the ability to communicate that understanding

SLIDE: EMPATHY DEFINITION

Focus is on the other

Distinction between self and other is preserved

Don't have to be similar to the other to feel empathy

Empathy can lead to either distress or caring and helping

SLIDE: RELATED CONSTRUCTS

Pity: sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed, or unhappy
implies slightly contemptuous sorrow for one in misery or distress
self-centered

Sympathy: a relationship between two people where whatever affects one similarly affects the other (emotional contagion)

errors of projection (self-centered)

errors of over-identification (self-centered)

Compassion: "to suffer together": sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it

SLIDE: BENEFITS OF CLINICAL EMPATHY

Patients:

report more about their symptoms and concerns

provide more illness-specific information

have increased participation in clinical encounter

report increased compliance and satisfaction

have reduced emotional distress/increased quality of life

SLIDE: CLINICAL BENEFITS OF EMPATHY II

Diabetic patients have lower HgA1C and cholesterol; also fewer acute metabolic incidents that would require hospitalization

Patients with common cold reported fewer symptoms, shorter duration

Depressed patients: empathy has a moderate-to-large causal effect in recovery

SLIDE: EMPATHY A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD FOR PHYSICIANS?

Positive:

Empathy linked to physician well-being, sense of personal accomplishment, job satisfaction

- Identified as protective factor against burn-out

- Higher ratings of clinical competence
- Lower levels of malpractice risk

Burn-out (fMRI) is correlated with reduced empathy-related brain activity (less/not more)

SLIDE: RISKS OF EMPATHY

Empathic over-arousal (too much empathy); emotionally over-involved, then don't feel anything when they should feel something

May promote personal distress in physician: **Cascade effect**

Physician unconsciously withdraws from pt

Self-protective motivation to reduce own feelings of distress

Self-centered, not patient-centered

SLIDE: WHAT THIS MEANS

Greater emotional dissonance and emotional dysregulation NOT empathy per se leads to compassion fatigue and burn-out

SLIDE: EMPATHY APPRAISAL – COMPASSION, DISTANCE, DISTRESS

All empathy starts with an automatic, brain response of neural mirroring, followed by some sort of cognitive appraisal. Depending on the nature of the cognitive appraisal, different types of empathy result

Distressed Empathy – unfiltered; excessive personal distress, over-identification, little cognitive appraisal; leads to emotional over-arousal, self-focus, avoidance

Distancing Empathy – distancing cognitive appraisal – yields aversion, blame, anger, avoidance, ignoring

Compassionate Empathy – cognitive appraisal perspective taking, curiosity; leads to compassion

SLIDE: THE RIGHT BALANCE

Emotional self-regulation - ability to develop and maintain control over one's behavior, thoughts, and emotions to enable practitioner to feel safe and calm in order to effectively perform her job

- Reinterpret, reframe situation (cognitive reappraisal, perspective-taking)
- Decenter from own anxiety back to patient experience
- Mindful compassion – learn to be compassionately present in the face of patient suffering without being overwhelmed (steadiness and tenderness)

Genuine, proportional concern for patients and families

SLIDE: HOW TO GET IT

Compassion Training teaches “sustainable compassion”

Mindfulness Meditation training: study shows that in response to sadness provoking stimuli, subjects trained in mindfulness still feel sad, but have less physiological arousal; less exhausted, distressed by their emotions

Don't get lost in the other's feelings

Use cognitive appraisals (stories) that avoid distress and aversion and instead focus on caring and helping

SLIDE: ELEMENTS OF CLINICAL EMPATHY

Cognitive understanding

Emotional engagement (patient senses dr cares)

Nonverbal attunement

- Gestures, body position
- Empathic listening

Curiosity/imagination

Perspective-taking

Language

- Acknowledging patient emotions
- Not "I know how you're feeling;" but "Help me better understand how you're feeling"
- Paraphrase, clarify

Loving kindness meditation

Empathy exercise:

- **clarifying, paraphrasing, summarizing**
- **perspective taking, curiosity (tell me more)**
- **expressing concern and caring**