

EMPATHIC CURIOSITY

Empathic curiosity is a way for health-care professionals to manage stress

The method involves trying to understand another person's world from the inside out

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Many health-care professionals have reached a breaking point as the pandemic stretches into its third year. Seventy-four percent of [them reported feeling depressed](#), while 75 percent said they suffered from anxiety, in a 2021 survey that included over 500 medical professionals. Even more alarming, 15 percent of respondents said they experienced thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

"Covid has been really hard on medical professionals," says pediatrician Janet Perlman, an instructor at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of California at San Francisco Joint Medical Program. "We're trying to keep patients safe while also caring for our own physical and psychological well-being."

Health-care providers can manage this crisis by practicing a specific type of empathy that one of us (Jodi Halpern) calls "[empathic curiosity](#)." It involves trying to understand another person's world from the inside out. In health care, this means inquiring about the patient's unique experiences by asking questions such as "tell me more" and "tell me what I'm missing." Exercising this type of empathy creates space for the patient and doctor to think together and discover novel ways to improve care.

Empathy in patient care

"Empathic curiosity" doesn't require providers to take on more of their patient's suffering, however, says Johanna Shapiro, a professor of family medicine at the University of California at Irvine. Instead, "sustaining curiosity, which is already a valued part of the medical role, can be a bridge that helps physicians experience more empathy for their patients," she says.

Stewart Mercer, a researcher at the University of Edinburgh, says "empathic curiosity may protect doctors from burnout and improve their work satisfaction." Additional research shows that [medical students who practice cognitive, in addition to emotional, empathy](#) sustain higher levels of empathy over time.

Mercer's research has found that empathy plays a significant role in effective patient care. One study, which included 710 cancer patients in Germany, found that [physician empathy may help prevent patients' depression](#). Empathy has also been shown to bolster the [patient-doctor relationship](#) and better patients' quality of life. Mercer says empathic communication can also improve the immune system and lower mortality rates for patients with diabetes.

Perlman says [empathic communication fosters trust](#), which plays an important role in whether patients follow through on their doctor's recommendations. Studies also show that [empathy can help decrease a patient's stress and anxiety](#) and help them [share more about what they are feeling](#), a key factor to getting a correct diagnosis.

Perlman said she exercises empathic curiosity by asking her patients open-ended questions such as "How are things going at home?" and "How are you feeling about school?"

These questions invite the pediatrician's patients to tell her about more than their physical aches. Many young people, for example, tell Perlman about their school struggles and friendship difficulties, two emotional challenges that affect [adolescent mental health](#), which has worsened during the pandemic.

Practicing empathic curiosity

For health-care workers and others interested in learning how to cultivate empathic curiosity, here are some expert-backed tips:

Practice self-awareness: When Adrian Anzaldua began his psychiatry internship at the University of New Mexico in 2021 during the delta variant surge, he witnessed the anguish and exhaustion that many of his colleagues were experiencing. Like many overworked physicians, Anzaldua sometimes felt overwhelmed seeing so much death and suffering.

As a new physician, he knew that almost all residents struggle with impostor syndrome — in which people think that they are not qualified for the position they hold — and worry about making a clinical mistake. To cope with these insecurities, Anzaldua exercised empathic curiosity. "I know it can protect physicians from burnout, which is why it became my top priority," he says. This practice led to new insights such as realizing that empathic pain can be a precursor for emotional growth and professional development, Anzaldua says.

One way to cultivate curiosity is through the practice of mindfulness, Shapiro says. "With mindfulness, the purpose is to bring inquisitiveness to the present moment, without getting attached to the outcome," she says. Research shows that a [curious mind-set can help health-care providers](#) with self-reflection and emotional regulation. These two qualities can foster an "adaptive expertise," which can help medical students and providers approach uncertain situations with interest instead of dread.

Find peer support: For emotional support, Perlman relies on her peers. "I'm part of a physician's community, which is a safe space where we can give and receive empathy," she says.

One study, which included 108 physicians, found that when faced with negative experiences such as trauma, medical errors and adverse patient experiences, 88 percent of the [doctors felt most supported by their peers](#). Research also shows that receiving empathy helps [physicians](#)

[provide empathy for their patients](#). Recognizing and expressing emotions can also help health-care providers avoid burnout and depression.

Perlman says it's important to be with like-minded colleagues who face similar struggles because it reminds her that she's not alone.

Hospitals may have [physician well-being programs](#), which can include peer-led support groups. The [American Medical Association](#) also provides a guide for physicians and health-care providers who want to start their own support circles.

Immerse yourself in stories: Another way that health-care providers can foster empathic curiosity is by reading stories and poetry or watching movies and TV dramas. Immersing themselves in other people's narratives helps providers step away from their anxiety and self-doubts, as well as increases their appreciation of other people's perspectives.

"Reading a story or poem about illness illustrates experiences that medical students and physicians face, but they're not asked to solve," Shapiro says. This learning strategy, which is called "[successive approximation](#)," can help them think about these situations in a safer way. Doing so also can prime the brain for problem-solving and empathic responding when stressful encounters arise.

At certain medical schools across the nation, health-care professionals teach an elective course called "[The Healer's Art](#)," which seeks to humanize medicine through storytelling and creative expression. One study revealed that teaching this course improved [physicians' professional growth, connection and empathy](#) for their students.

Finally, Perlman recommends practicing "generous listening." "Let your patient tell their story, and you'll learn so much about their lives," she says. She also encourages medical students to ask good questions. "The medicine will come, but it's how you talk with someone that matters most."