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Empathy and Nursing

Manoranjitham S *, Mythily Vandana S Charles, Aruna Gnanapragasam and Alice Sony

College of Nursing, Christian Medical College, Vellore, Affiliated with The Tamil Nadu Dr. M.G.R. Medical University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Abstract

Empathy is a fundamental concept that nurses are made aware of in the beginning of their nursing journey. Various attempts have been made to define and understand this complex construct. To be better helpers, nurses need to possess Empathy to understand a patient's painful and often confusing journey with illness and the healthcare system. Various benefits have been shown when healthcare professionals use empathy while caring for their patients, but there are various barriers that challenge the practice of empathy in the overburdened healthcare setting. Though individuals who take up nursing may already have empathetic traits, empathetic skills can be taught and developed over time and nurse educators can play a vital role in this aspect. It must be acknowledged that Empathy has a significant role to play in healthcare.

Keywords: Empathy; Nursing; Nurses; Healthcare; Nursing students

1. Introduction

One of the many concepts that nurses have been taught at the beginning of their nursing journey is the concept of Empathy. Nurses are involved in helping relationships with their patients. Patients undergo a gamut of emotions and experiences (mostly painful and negative) when they are diagnosed with illness and when they come in contact with healthcare. They are generally at their most vulnerable and experience new, unfamiliar needs. Nurses are required to understand the needs, emotions, and situations of their patients, to be able to provide relevant care for them. Empathy is one of the characteristics (and skills) that nurses must possess that will allow them to understand what their patients are going through and offer care accordingly. Researchers have attempted to define Empathy in various ways, leading to much confusion as to what the term really means. This article attempts to briefly delve into certain aspects of Empathy and its relevance in healthcare, especially to nursing.

2. Understanding Empathy

The capacity to be empathetic appears to be influenced by neurobiology. Neuroscientists have identified that the Mirror Neuron System is activated more strongly among empathic people when they listen to other people's problems. (1)

Many approaches have been used to understand and define Empathy. One of the most uncomplicated definitions is that Empathy is "the ability to put oneself in the place of other people in order that a person can visualize and feel the experiences of other(s) from the same perspective." (2) In simple terms, it is "feeling as the other" (3). Looking at these definitions, it is apparent that empathy is an essential component of social interactions. Being able to understand what another person is going through or feeling would help individuals have more meaningful and satisfying interpersonal relationships.

* Corresponding author: Manoranjitham S

Empathy appears to be a complex construct, and it is, considering that there have been various attempts to define it. But fundamentally, it has 3 basic processes- cognitive, affective and behavioural. (4,5). Individuals who are empathetic are not only able to sense other's emotions and but are also able to imagine or understand what the other person is thinking or feeling. It thus allows the individual to be moved by another's experience, generating a feeling of concern. It also enables compassionate action- where one is moved to help or care for a person in need (6).

Halpern, J. (2003) differentiates how empathy is viewed within the field of medicine and outside it. Doctors (and other healthcare professionals) generally strive for detachment to be able to care for their patients in an objective manner. In healthcare, empathy is considered as the ability to acknowledge another person's emotional state but not experiencing the state themselves (7). This would indicate that it has more of an intellectual processing to it than an emotional one. The experience of emotion appears to be considered unimportant in understanding the patients' feelings.

Another term that is used in contrast to empathy is sympathy. Sympathy is considered having more emotion associated with it. In healthcare, it involves overidentifying with the patient and therefore a threat to objectivity, leading to detriment in patient care. Empathy, on the other hand, is more concerned with "understanding" than "feeling" and is considered beneficial (8).

3. Advantages of Empathy in Healthcare and Nursing

No illness is generally a pleasant experience and patients crave for care by empathetic healthcare members during these periods of discomfort. Studies have shown that Empathy enables practitioners to provide better quality of care. It also raises patient satisfaction, reduces complications, and lowers healthcare costs. Clinical outcomes are correlated with the level of patients' perception of empathy from their providers. Empathy also helps in reducing caregiver burnout and the risk of malpractice litigation (9).

Empathy is a fundamental aspect to helping relationships. It allows nurses to understand their patients more accurately and meet their needs effectively. (10) It also allows for effective communication- it is a vital part of therapeutic communication and is valuable for the development of a meaningful relationship between the nurse and the patient. It facilitates trust and makes the patient more comfortable in disclosing information. It can help nurses anticipate unexpressed needs and address them. It also enhances therapeutic efficacy and reduces anxiety (11). Other aspects of the patient, including psychosocial issues, are more likely to be elicited and addressed when healthcare members are empathetic (4). One study recognized that the empathy shapes caring behaviors which patients are able to acknowledge and appreciate among the healthcare workers (12). These findings demonstrate that Empathy cannot be overlooked in health care and in nursing, since the benefits associated with it are significant and measurable.

4. Improving Empathy

Since Nursing is a caring practice, it is likely that individuals who take up the profession already have altruistic and empathetic traits. But Empathetic skills can be taught and developed over time (13). Nurse educators play a vital role in instilling empathy in nursing students and there are various innovative ways that have been identified in the literature. In a study among undergraduate nursing students, storytelling and empathy training was identified to augment simulation-based learning experiences to promote empathy development. Another study carried out a role reversal simulation (RRS) based on cancer patients' experiences; this helped participants have a better holistic understanding of their patients and there was an increase in empathy that led to reflection on practice and a plan to change practice (14). Empathy development should be given importance in the nursing curriculum. Nurse educators can make use of teaching opportunities to instil this under-recognized value in nursing students. Reflection and resilience and self-knowledge are other skills that nurses must possess to be able to practice empathy effectively (15).

5. Barriers to practice Empathy

It is challenging to practice empathy on a daily basis especially in stressful working conditions. Despite the advantages that technology offers in the field of health it can also be a barrier to face-to-face communication and to empathy (15). This disconnect can cause nurses to fail to recognize situations that require empathy and can limit caring behaviours. Nurses need to spend time listening and understanding the patients perspectives to be empathetic which becomes difficult with the amount of workload, understaffing, long working hours and time constraints (16, 17). The process of practicing Empathy can be emotionally draining and morally challenging for a Nurse. Nurses who lack compassion, self-critical, and experience psychological distress are less likely to be empathetic. Lack of formal training for empathetic

skills, lack of role models, task oriented nursing, poor managerial support are also other factors that can impede nurses in practicing empathy (18).

6. Conclusion

Though Empathy is a complex concept to define, there is clear evidence that it has a significant role in healthcare. It is an important aspect of the nurse-patient relationship and without it, patients would be dissatisfied with the care provided. In this era of fast-developing technology, the concept of Empathy appears to be more important than ever. The role of Nurse educators in this teachable skill should not be underestimated. They need to train and ensure the practice of empathetic skills even as the nursing curricula continues to evolve. All healthcare staff need to receive and model Empathy to create a culture of Empathy in the healthcare industry.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

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