
Teaching Doctors Empathy



Conflicts between doctors and patients are not uncommon. Often, patients disagree with their doctors regarding drug prescription while doctors remain closed-minded about patient feedback and alternate solutions. Since doctors have a position of power in a patient-doctor relationship, either the patient has to cave in to the doctor's decision or the doctor could lose his patience and refer the patient to another physician.

Massachusetts General Hospital has implemented a research and training program that is designed to teach doctors empathy. This is the first program of its kind offered by a hospital. Empathy, traditionally defined as the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes is not necessarily something that is innate or acquired. The program by Mass. General Hospital provides empirical evidence that empathy can indeed be taught.

Dr. Helen Riess, a psychiatrist who is directing the Empathy and Relational Science Program explains that this training is designed to enhance relationships, increase job satisfaction and improve overall patient outcomes. She is confident that doctors would gain from this program.

Dr. Riess and her team measured the physiological responses during patient-doctor interactions. They used technology similar to lie detector tests to measure micro-perspiration of the skin, the heart rate of the doctor and the patient and their skin temperature. They found that when either of the participants got upset, these symptoms increased but when there was no stress or tension between the two parties, the signs abated. The premise behind this training program is that a positive relationship between a doctor and a patient can contribute to improved health outcomes. It can also result in a decline in malpractice claims because patients who have a meaningful relationship with their healthcare provider are unlikely to sue them.

Dr. Riess developed this program when she started Empathethics, an online interactive course for healthcare professionals. MGH and Brigham and Women's Hospital have now also implemented the program and require all residents at the teaching hospitals to complete the course.

A primary reason why doctors lose empathy is their exposure to disease, sickness and death. In order to survive, they have to become stronger and develop a thick skin. That is why they become less receptive towards others and adopt a dominant position.

This program helps doctors learn the art of empathy and helps them become less defensive. It also improves their patience level so that they don't lose it if a patient is annoying. Every healthcare provider has to deal with tricky patients but reacting aggressively with such patients is not the solution. Doctors can either become more tolerant or develop skills to cope with such patients. Some strategies include discussing the patient with another colleague, leaving the room to gather their thoughts or to practice breathing exercises. The program also trains doctors on how to deliver bad news and to ensure they understand the patient's point of view before delivering such news. Doctors should be able to provide support under tough circumstances and make the patient feel that there is someone looking out for them.

Source: [Boston Globe](#)

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