Empathy, Empathy, Where Art Thou?

Richard M. Frankel Ph.D.
Professor of Medicine and Geriatrics
Regenstrief Institute
IU School of Medicine
Center for Healthcare Information and Communication
Roudebush VAMC

AACOM Empathy Project
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A Doctor’s Story: Told for the 1st Time after 25 Years

I was a 3rd year student in the ER when a family (grandmother, uncle, and 10 year old girl) came in badly burned. The girl was in arrest and despite all our efforts died... The smell of charred flesh was overpowering. I was sent to ask the mother for an autopsy. Instead of beginning with news of her death I began with, “Sorry to bother you, but we would like to do an autopsy on your daughter...” The mother screamed and collapsed, hitting her head on the floor. I was aghast, guilty, stunned, felt inadequate to make any appropriate response. I still feel terrible about it to this today.
Three Questions to Ponder?

• What 2-3 words describe your first reaction to this story?
• What feelings does the narrator describe and what emotions did he express when the mother collapsed?
• What psychological conditions are associated with unexpressed emotions?
In 1964, Justice Potter Stewart in trying to define ‘obscenity’ said, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . but I know it when I see it . . . “

Like the blind men and the elephant, empathy has been defined in many different ways for many different reasons. I shall not today attempt a comprehensive definition or review of the research literature but rather try to present a broad overview of research on empathic communication.
Empathy is a 20th Century Word

It derives from the Ancient Greek *(empatheia)*, "physical affection, passion, partiality" which, in turn, derives from *(pathos)*, "passion" or "suffering". It was translated imperfectly from the German, Einfühlung, (roughly, to feel into) as used in architecture, into the English word “Empathy” by Edward B. Titchener who used it in his theory of introspection in 1909.
What is Empathic Communication?

EC is a verbal, visual or non-verbal provider *response* to the explicit or indirect expression of emotion by a patient. As compared with sympathy, which involves experiencing the same emotion as the other, empathy involves resonance with another’s emotions without having to directly experience them oneself.
EC Has Three Constituents

1. Recognition - Comes from “reading” emotions and hints at emotion

2. Sorting - What I observe or infer about the other as contrasted with how it makes me feel internally

3. Response - Selecting from possible verbal and non verbal behaviors ones that accurately resonate with the patient’s emotional state
Empathy Arises From:

Cognitive awareness = Feelings

Feelings | Emotions

External expressions = Emotions
One of These Two Players is Holding 4 Aces. Which one is it?
Expression of Emotions in Health Care
Expression of Emotions in Aviation

US Airways Flight 1549
January 15, 2009
Weehawken, NJ
Researching Empathic Communication

Using Potter Stewart’s model of knowing it when we saw it, we reviewed 100 videotapes looking for examples of empathy. Surprisingly, we found just one! We then asked what might be happening that was related to empathic communication but fell short of being an empathic response. This led us to identify clear-cut empathic opportunities and what we termed potential or pre-empathic opportunities. It also led to publication in JAMA.
An Example of Empathic Communication

Dr.: You seem a little upset, you seem a little teary-eyed.
Pt.: Yeah, well, it gets to you. This is the first time I’ve had a little session like this, see where you really are talking to someone about it. I-I think I’m blessed because... I had a very dear friend who passed but she waited too long and she had to have chemotherapy and I haven’t had to and I should be thankful and I am but you know, I guess that’s why I’m crying... I don’t know.

Dr.: That’s right, it’s frightening.
Pt.: It is because you hear about so much and everything but I always say if I don’t have to endure so much pain I mean, but I imagine when when the time comes for any pain to, you know, to endure that you can go through that too, you know.
A Model of Empathy in the Medical Encounter

Potential Empathic Opportunity Continuer

Empathic Opportunity

Potential Empathic Opportunity Terminator

Empathic Opportunity Terminator

Empathic Response

Patient Feels Understood

Suchman et al., JAMA 1997; 227:8
What Does EC Look and Sound Like?
The Changing Role of Empathy in Medical Care

Until recently, physicians were taught to view their own feelings, emotions and relationships with patients as barriers to making good “objective” decisions. In other words, mask or “stuff” your own feelings and emotional responses.
EC and Positive Outcomes

EC associated with:

• Reduced C section rates (56%)

• Reduced hospital stay for GI surgery (50%)

• Reduced patient distress & satisfaction while reassurance & support did not
  - Wasserman R, 1984

• Reduced burnout for physicians in an educational intervention
  - Boissy A, et. al. (2016)
Challenges that Lie Ahead

• Integration of theory, method, and application of various frameworks for studying empathy
• More precise understanding of the costs and benefits of empathy and EC
• Better ways to teach and assess empathy in selecting, educating supporting practicing physicians
If there is anything I have learned about men and women, it is that there is a deeper spirit [of generosity] than is ever evident. Just as the rivers we see are minor compared to the underground streams, so, too, the idealism that is visible is minor compared to what people carry in their hearts unreleased or scarcely released. (Hu)mankind is waiting and longing for those who can accomplish the task of untying what is knotted, and bringing these underground waters to the surface.

—Albert Schweitzer