Illness, Challenges to the Self and the Power of Empathic Curiosity

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Empathy Crucial for History-taking

- Patients give hints before they convey important information.
- Non-verbally attuned clinicians respond, and then patients communicate.

Suchman A, Markakis K, Beckman H, Frankel R. A model of empathic communication in the medical interview. JAMA. 1997; 277(8):678-682;

Empathy, trust and adherence

• Trust is the most important predictor of adherence.

• What predicts trust?
  • Not friendliness.
  • Genuine worry when patient is worried.


Giving Bad News

• Empathic Listening:
  • Decreased patient anxiety
  • Increased patient coping skills.
  • Improved patient activation, decision-making and seeking support.

Does empathy cause “sympathetic distress” that interferes with medical care?
Anxiety Interferes with Empathy

• Medical students who become more personally distressed in response to patients’ distress have steeper declines in cognitive empathy during training.

Empathic Curiosity and Self-Regulation

• Key shift: Distinguish resonance for another’s suffering from self-related anxiety.

• Curiosity about another person’s feelings reduces self-related anxiety.

Cognitive vs Emotional Empathy

Zaki J et al. PNAS 2009;106:11382-11387
Doctors Lack Empathy for Pain

• General population: seeing a needle going into another’s skin stimulates the observer’s own pain receptors.
• Doctors show much less response.

Increased Self Regulation

• Physicians observing needle sticks showed more brain activity in areas involving executive control and self-regulation.

Decety et al, 2010
Cognitive Empathy Skills Reduce Personal Distress

• Oncologists and hospice clinicians with “exquisite empathy”:
  Lowest levels of burnout and distress of any physicians.

Practicing Empathic Curiosity

• Concern can interfere with empathy, address your anxiety.

• Use negative emotions to learn about the patient.

• Listen to and repeat the patient’s specific words.

• Avoid disputing the facts, just listen.