

UCSD Research Ethics Program & The Institute for Practical Ethics
2018 Biomedical Ethics Seminar Series

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

Jodi Halpern, MD PhD

Professor of Bioethics and Medical Humanities

University of California, Berkeley

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;

Finset, Arnstein (2011). Research on person-centered clinical care. Journal of Evaluation In Clinical Practice. 2011; 17(2), s 384- 386.

Empathy, trust and adherence

- Trust is the most important predictor of adherence.
- What predicts trust?
 - Not friendliness.
 - Genuine worry when patient is worried.

Roter, D.L., Hall, J.A., Merisca, R. Nordstrom, B., Cretin, D. and Svarstad, B. Effectiveness of interventions to improve patient compliance: a meta-analysis. Medical Care, 1998. 36(8):1138-1161.

Kim, S. S., Kaplowitz, S., & Johnston, M .V. (2004). The effects of physician empathy on patient satisfaction and compliance. Evaluation and the Health Professions, 2004. 27, 237-251.

Giving Bad News

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

Girgis A, Sanson-Fisher RW. Breaking bad news 1: Current advice for clinicians. J Behav Med.. 1998;24:53-59;Ptacek J.T., Eberhardt T.L. Breaking bad news: A review of the literature. JAMA. 1996;276(6):496-502.

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.

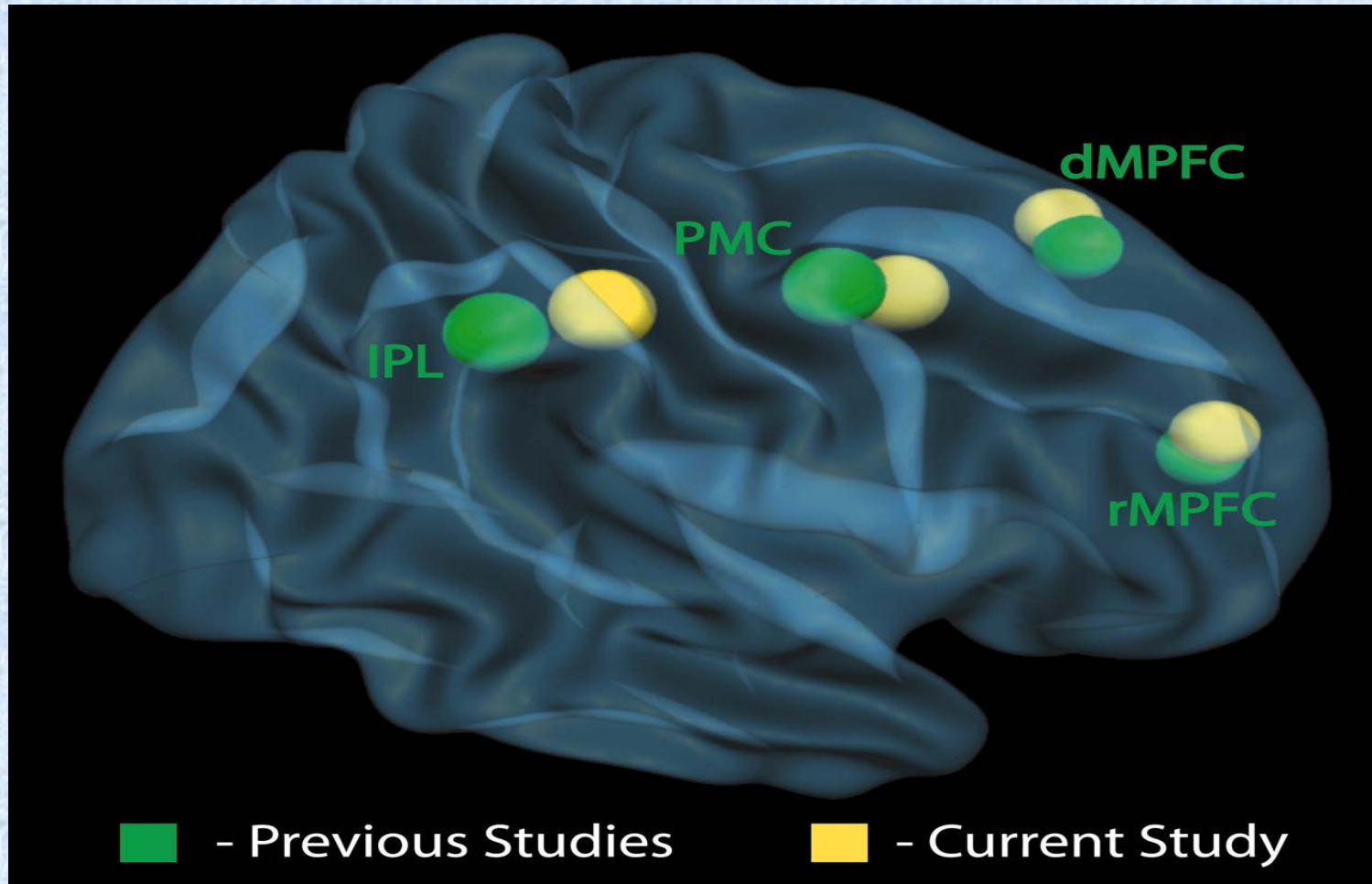
Neumann, M., Edelhauser, F., Tauschel, D., Fisher, M. R., Wirtz, M., Woopen, C., Haramati, A., & Scheffer, C. Empathy declines and its reasons: A systematic review of studies with medical students and residents. Academic Medicine, 2011. 86, 996-1009

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.

Decety, J. Smith, K., Norman, G., Halpern, J. Clinical Empathy: What can we learn from social and affective neuroscience? Academic Medicine, 2013, submitted

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.

Decety, J., Yang, C. Y., & Cheng, Y.. Physicians down regulate their pain empathy response: An event-related brain potential study. NeuroImage, 2010; 50, 1676-1682

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.

Kearney MK, Weininger RB, Vachon MS, Harrison RL, Mount BM. Self-care of Physicians Caring for Patients at the End of Life: “Being Connected . . . A Key to My Survival”. JAMA. 2009;301(11):1155-1164.

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.