Can empathic care be taught – and how does it help patients?

Research shows that empathy can calm anxiety, improve outcomes and boost staff well-being

The Stoneygate Centre for Empathic Healthcare, established at the University of Leicester in June 2022, is pioneering a new approach to medical, nursing and allied health education and training that positions empathy at the heart of healthcare delivery.

Evidence from high-quality research shows that a more empathic approach to healthcare can nurture greater trust between patients and practitioners, calm anxiety, enhance patient experience and improve outcomes.

What exactly is ‘empathic healthcare’?
There is an emerging consensus that therapeutic empathy involves understanding and demonstrating understanding of the patient as a whole person, as well as therapeutic action.

Empathy is an underlying theme in nursing education. While some believe that empathy cannot be taught, research suggests that even brief courses can lead to substantial improvements.

Unlike nursing, traditional medical education has followed a medical and diagnostic model until more recently, with modern curricula embracing the softer skills of communicating with patients holistically and as more of a partnership.

Why is this approach needed in healthcare?
The same type of evidence that demonstrates that drugs are effective and safe (systematic reviews of randomised trials), also shows that enhanced empathy reduces both chronic and acute patient pain, reduces morphine use, and improves cellular immunity in post-operative patients. An observational study found that enhanced empathy was associated with lower mortality in patients with diabetes.

We know that practitioners who provide empathic care not only increase patients’ quality of life and even life expectancy, but also improve their own job satisfaction and reduce the risk of burnout. A systematic review of ten surveys...
found that enhanced empathy was associated with a reduced risk of practitioner burnout.

Having the tools to connect with other people and build personal resilience can improve the well-being of practitioners across the NHS, strengthening the resilience and motivation of the workforce.

This is because enhancing empathy reminds practitioners about the reason they are in their profession: to care for patients. This can make them more resilient in the face of challenges.

Nursing students are encouraged to recognise that patients who are living with long-term conditions should be supported to be experts in the management of their own condition. This can improve empowerment, satisfaction and outcomes.

It is suggested, however, that some healthcare professionals are still cautious about encouraging this approach, due to the conflicting and varying information and resources available to patients when they conduct their own research.

The Stoneygate Centre for Empathic Healthcare focuses on medicine – how does nursing fit in?

Nursing forms a core part of the centre’s work, in three ways:

» We know that nurses and allied health professionals may be better at empathy, so the centre holds regular meetings with their education leaders to learn from them.

» Practitioners do not work in a vacuum, and empathy from practitioners towards patients requires empathic systems. Empathic systems, in turn, require empathic relationships between professions. Our ‘system empathy’ training involves deep interprofessional work.

» Many acute hospital trusts are on a Pathway to Excellence, which is an international framework designed to create a positive practice environment in which healthcare professionals can take ownership of their workspaces. The approach can foster positivity and growth of our working teams and create a more cohesive team overall.

How can nurses get involved?

Nurses are already involved with the centre’s work. We hold regular strategy meetings with senior nurses and our interdisciplinary system empathy workshop includes nurses.

Nurses, especially those in leadership roles who would like to work with us to enhance empathy in their organisations, are encouraged to get in touch.

What are some of the areas tackled in empathic healthcare?

Our medical education curriculum contains five streams:

» Interventions aimed at reversing the empathy decline. Student empathy declines throughout their education, and these interventions include teaching students to identify empathic role models and having more senior students support junior students through support groups.

» Getting patients into the lecture theatre during the teaching of pathophysiology.

» Empathic, evidence-based communication skills.

» ‘Walk a mile in your shoes’. Here we involve all medical professions, as well as creative arts professionals. Our students will have experiences, such as spending the night in the emergency department.

» Self-empathy (or well-being). Burned out and stressed practitioners cannot practice empathically.

Further information
Stoneygate Centre for Empathic Healthcare le.ac.uk/empathy
American Nurses Credentialing Center: Pathway to Excellence nursingworld.org/organizational-programs/pathway

‘Empathic patient communication is being present, listening, observing’

Advice from independent coach and clinical communication skills trainer Mandy Williams, who facilitated a workshop at the launch of the Stoneygate Centre on the goals of care conversations in acute care settings:

‘As nurses we occupy a privileged position when caring for patients and their loved ones. We are often present when they are at their most vulnerable, providing intimate care and support.

‘At the heart of skilful, holistic and individualised nursing care is empathic communication, the ability to be truly present for that person, to listen, observe and ask courageous questions – to understand and appreciate the person within the patient.

‘As members of the multidisciplinary team we share our knowledge of the patient and their loved ones, contributing to compassionate care and management plans and advocating on their behalf.

‘Finally, we are role models. How we demonstrate empathic care and communication is observed by our trainees, colleagues, patients and their loved ones. We influence behaviours and memories.’