Understanding Empathy

Engaging patients is seen as a critical part of the nurse patient relationship with interpersonal skills, such as active listening and empathy being critical. The use of empathy skills have been well documented across the health professions particularly with Nurses Medical staff pharmacists dentists.

A conceptual understanding of empathy

Empathy has been proposed to be the ability to perceive the meaning and feelings of another and to communicate those feelings to the other person. The majority of definitions of empathy stem from work by the psychologist Carl Rogers. Rogers describes empathy as the state of perceiving the internal frame of reference of another person with accuracy and with emotional components and meanings that pertain to it, as if one were with the other person, but without the loss of the “as-if” condition. Emptahity has been prosed to follow stages; understanding and recognizing the other person (empathee’s) emotions, communicating this understanding to the empathee, recognizing that this has been understood. Empathy is also seen as; seeing the world as others see it, being non judgemental, understanding another’s feelings and communicating such understanding. Empathy has been broken into two parts by some authors; cognitive empathy and affective empathy. The cognitive domain involves the ability to understand another persons inner experience and feelings, with an ability to view the outside world from the other persons perspective.

The affective domain involves the entering into or joining in the emotional experience of the other, which may also define sympathy. Whilst it maybe difficult for health professionals to function solely in one domain the health professional who acts in the affective domain could lose their objectivity and becomes overwhelmed by the emotions of the patient in their care. The affective domain of empathy has been also been described as a maladaptive human response. Showing cognitive empathy involves the ability of the health professional to disentangle themselves from the others emotional state and remember whose feelings or emotions belong to whom. Models and strategies to learn how to manage you emotions and behaviour are contained in the literature on clinical supervision and stress management interventions.
**Why demonstrate empathy?**

Positive relationships between Carl Rogers core interpersonal conditions and client responses, such as relief from pain, improve pulse and respiratory rates, and clients self report of worry and distress have been shown. Nurses who displayed high levels of empathy to institutionalised elderly patients, have found that these patients experienced a statistically significant improvement of self concept as understood by a reduction in dehumanization and depersonalisation. Less anxiety, depression, hostility in cancer patients being cared for by nurses who show high levels of empathy has been demonstrated. The quality of client self discloser was found to be associated with the level of empathy used by nurses.

The is a growing recognition of the value of showing empathy in the nurse patient relationship, the reading list below has references mentioned above, the book by Jan Stein-Parbury is an excellent guide to obtaining empathy skills at a higher level.
