

THE EMPATHY IMPERATIVE IN WHOLE PERSON CARE - FOR PATIENTS AND PHYSICIANS

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Clinical empathy is associated with improved patient satisfaction, treatment compliance, and better health. At the same time, empirical evidence shows that strong empathic connections between physicians and patients increase job satisfaction and decrease malpractice complaints. Plus, doctors with higher levels of empathy also experience less stress, cynicism, and burnout. Empathy in healthcare should be the norm. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

Physicians encounter emotionally taxing situations—illness, trauma, suffering, and dying—on a frequent or ongoing basis. Which might explain why they may miss or dismiss signs of patient distress. But there's a growing body of evidence that points to overwork and a lack of self-care as a major problem. In fact, relative to the general population, doctors suffer from higher rates of compassion fatigue, burnout, depression, and suicide.

The long hours, administrative workload, and financial imperatives of today's medical practice means that many physicians struggle to prioritize self-care, including a lack of sleep, exercise, and healthy eating

habits. All of this was further exacerbated by the pressure of the recent COVID pandemic. Yet physicians are not permitted to appear vulnerable or weak because doing so is inconsistent with the culture of medicine.

This session will explore why empathy and self-empathy are both imperative to whole person care - for physicians and their patients. And will suggest several strategies and practices to combat empathy fatigue. ■