

The Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Healthcare

Nurses, doctors, and administrators in healthcare settings face a unique challenge in providing patient services while also managing typical workplace situations and stressors. Mutually satisfying patient care and staff welfare is now a critical focus for healthcare professionals. Emotional intelligence (EI) provides healthcare professionals with the needed skills to manage the many roles they must play (e.g., expert, consoler, supporter, colleague, or boss).



How does increased emotional intelligence benefit doctors?

While doctors are noted for generally above-average intelligence (given the rigor of the education and occupation), it is interesting to note that EI among doctors tends to be closer to average¹. This finding is reinforced by the idea that although many physicians are technical experts in their field, they sometimes lack the communication, empathy, and interpersonal skills necessary to become more effective leaders and better providers of patient-focused healthcare. Often, people's experiences with healthcare revolve around their interactions with physicians, making them the primary focus for EI development efforts; however, the skills and competencies of EI can play a critical role at all levels of healthcare, from students to nurses, doctors, leaders, and administrators^{2,3,4,5}.

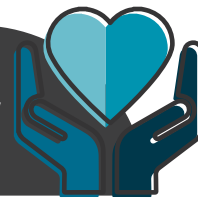


For example, research has highlighted the importance of certain EI skills, most notably empathy, for doctors when interacting with patients. One study using the Emotional Quotient Inventory 2.0® (EQ-i 2.0®) found that the Empathy scores of physicians influenced how well diabetic patients were able to control important health markers⁶. Improving patient satisfaction through empathic care and understanding can lead to increased patient loyalty and adherence, therapeutic benefits, and even lower numbers of malpractice lawsuits⁵.

There has also been increased importance placed on physicians' intrapersonal skills, which may help doctors deal with the competing demands of their high stress working environment. One study, involving 30 physicians and 232 patients, found that a physician's Happiness score on the EQ-i 2.0 influenced a patient's satisfaction with the care they received. A physician's self-awareness of their mood and how it will impact their patient is an important performance criterion for providing effective and well-received patient care⁶.

Emotional intelligence was also examined in the context of dentistry⁶. In one study, a group of 144 dentists who studied at the Pankey Institute, a dental school in the U.S., were evaluated with the EQ-i 2.0, and their progress was monitored following their training. Their EQ-i scores were found to be directly related to their success at implementing in their dental practices the initiatives that they were taught in the training program. The study found that the most important EI factors related to success were Emotional Self-Awareness, Reality Testing, Assertiveness, and Self-Actualization.

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What is the impact of emotional intelligence in medical schools?

The importance of EI in the medical community is echoed in the interest in using EI as part of the selection process of medical students or as an integrated training component of medical degrees⁵. Research has illustrated the importance of incorporating EI in medical school admission systems, in addition to cognitive intelligence⁴.

More recent research looked at how EI training can be incorporated into medical education beyond its use in admissions. One study by Shahid and Stirling found that EQ-i 2.0 scores in Assertiveness naturally increased and Empathy decreased throughout an individual's residency program, suggesting that the tracking of these EI skills could inform medical programs about specific areas or timepoints in which additional or targeted EI training may be most impactful⁷. Shahid and Adams also found that direct EI training can increase an individual's scores during residency⁸. They found that educational intervention resulted in significant increases in Total EI scores, along with increases in Stress Tolerance, Flexibility, and Optimism, suggesting that EI training can improve resiliency and reduce the risk of burnout.

How can developing emotional intelligence help in other areas of healthcare?

In nursing, researchers examined the link between the importance of EI and the leadership skills needed to enhance communication and lead teams. The study reported on the impact of an EI intervention that was implemented as part of a nurse practitioner (NP) program. The study assessed student EI before and after the intervention and followed 43 NPs over the course of 15 months. Leveraging the EQ-i 2.0, results showed that emotional intelligence traits including Flexibility, Stress Tolerance, Optimism, and Decision Making showed statistically significant increases from baseline to post-intervention⁹. Researchers concluded that leadership skills, including emotional intelligence, are a key component to success as a nursing professional. Because most nursing programs do not include emotional intelligence assessment or training, these researchers recommended that schools of nursing consider practical methods of implementing EI training into their nursing curriculum.

In another study, researchers looked at EI among healthcare professionals and students in order to better define and incorporate it into pharmacy curricula. The results of this study concluded that it is imperative for pharmacy students to develop and improve their EI in order to support the development of successful relationships with patients, pharmacy colleagues, and other healthcare providers¹⁰. In addition, awareness of one's own biases and emotions can help regulate behaviors so as to facilitate enhanced communication with others. These positive outcomes associated with greater EI can, in turn, yield positive patient outcomes for those who benefit from the care of emotionally intelligent pharmacists.



How can increased emotional intelligence benefit our overall healthcare system?

From the perspective of a healthcare provider, developing and maintaining emotional intelligence has been linked to lower levels of stress and burnout. From a patient perspective, healthcare professionals with EI skills are more likely to demonstrate improvements in communication, better caregiver-patient relationships, and a richer understanding of a patient's emotional reactions to treatment, all of which contribute to higher patient satisfaction levels.

**Keep the conversation going.
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References

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