

WELLBEING SERIES

EMPATHY AND PARAMEDIC WELLBEING

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Abstract

Background

In this wellbeing series we present practical advice for prehospital care providers, responders, and other shift workers. These articles are produced by experts in their field. Many of these topics were presented at the Irish College of Paramedics Wellbeing Symposium in University College Cork in May 2019.

Keywords: paramedic, wellbeing, prehospital, health.

What is empathy and why is it important?

Empathy is generally defined as an understanding of another person's reactions, thoughts, feelings and problems.

What do we know about empathy in paramedic practice?

Empathy in paramedic practice is poorly understood, and there are only a handful of studies conducted, primarily in paramedic students. What we know from these studies is that paramedic students generally display lower empathy scores towards substance users and mental health emergencies. Females are more empathetic than males, and paramedic students tend to display overall lower empathy scores than other healthcare students.

How does this impact on paramedic wellbeing?

Low levels of empathy have been found to be related to higher likelihood of burnout in some studies. Some studies suggest that being empathetic can be a protective mechanism against burnout. Others suggest that healthcare providers use this desensitisation as a defence mechanism against the everyday realities of clinical practice. What remains unclear is do paramedics who are suffering from "burnout" have less empathy as a result, or is their lower empathy the reason they are suffering from burnout?

How can you improve your empathy?

Contrary to widely-held opinion, empathy is an interpersonal skill that can be taught, learned, and improved. Empathy levels can be improved upon through several methods, both formally within curricula and informally or on a personal level.

Curricular initiatives

1. Incorporate reflective practice and critical thinking in the curriculum. Show someone how to reflect before asking them to do it. Give them time to develop comfort and expertise with it.
2. Incorporate non-technical skills in simulations. Some of the most challenging clinical situations I put my paramedic students through involve proficiency with communication and empathy more than clinical skills.
3. Consider alternative placements. Non-clinical interactions with vulnerable populations (older adults, homeless etc.) have demonstrated improved attitudes among healthcare professional students and have provided these students with insight into the lived experience.

Personal improvements

1. Learn something new and challenge yourself. Be open to both good and bad experiences—this can be humbling, which is important for the development of empathy.
2. Try to think about why something is happening rather than judging what is happening. This simple trick turns every experience with someone into a possibility to develop new knowledge or perspectives.
3. Surround yourself with people who are different—we learn from others, and being exposed to others with differing backgrounds, viewpoints, cultures, religions etc. can aid in broadening our tolerance of, and understanding of, other people. If you can't do this on a long-term or continuing basis, travel to new places and experience new cultures.
4. Own your biases. We all have them, it's inherently human. Think about them, and acknowledge them. It may help to write them down. Then be aware of these biases when interacting with others, and focus on minimising their impact.
5. Seek feedback from friends, family, peers, co-workers about your interpersonal skills. Become better at listening—don't interrupt.
6. Consider mindfulness or meditation to increase your quiet time and allow you to focus on what is happening. Be in the present.

Further reading: Kus, L., Henderson, L., & Batt, A. M. (2019). Empathy in paramedic practice: an overview. *Journal of Paramedic Practice*, 11(4), 1–5.