Soapbox: What Empathy Is Not!

By Wendy Lebov, Ed.D., Partner & Founder, Language of Caring, LLC

“The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear or the mind. Hence it demands emptiness of all of the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind.”

--Chuang-Tzu

We know that empathy is good for patients. It engenders trust, which increases patient comfort, reduces anxiety, fosters engagement, and leads to more positive health outcomes. When physicians are empathic, patients feel a connection or common ground and their recovery rates improve. Empathy is also good for providers. It helps doctors do their jobs well and reduce their own disillusionment and burnout. And empathy among members of the care team builds relationships and strengthens collaboration.

Often We THINK We’re Being Empathic, But We Aren’t

Most of us learned to listen with our minds. We think about how to respond or how to fix the problem or what this reminds us of in our own lives. When we listen with our minds, we are not in the moment and we are not really connecting with the other person. Empathy involves mindful questioning, curiosity and wondering about the other person’s experience—connecting at a deeper level.

**Situation:** Your coworker says, “*My boss expects the impossible!*”

Below are typical responses, NONE of which are empathy. I’m not saying they are inappropriate responses. I’m just saying they are not empathy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT EMPATHY</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sympathizing</td>
<td>“I hate your boss for doing that.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-Upping</td>
<td>“You think you have it hard. If I’m not stressed out, my boss thinks I don’t have enough to do! I remember a time when my boss...”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fixing</td>
<td>“I think you should tactfully confront your boss. I could help you practice.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapizing</td>
<td>“I think you’re overreacting. Everyone’s under pressure, but you have a poor me attitude.”</td>
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Feeling empathy involves tuning in eyes, ears, heart and soul--to really hear a person’s feelings and needs. Expressing empathy involves acknowledging these needs and feelings through words and nonverbal behavior. In the situation above, empathic responses sound like this:

- “You sound so frustrated. Are you?”
- “It sounds like a really stressful time for you.”
- “I’m so sorry you’re going through this.”
- “I feel for you. It sounds maddening.”

From Habitual Responding to Intentional Empathy

Many of us have habitual ways of responding that kick in when patients or colleagues reveal feelings, complain or express needs. See if you notice yourself using any of the “non-empathic” forms of responding. The challenge is to take a breath and CHOOSE how to respond when we want to show our empathy. Perhaps begin with the simplest form of empathy: asking “Are you feeling ________ ?” The result: connecting at a deeper level, learning more and having a stronger basis for helping going forward.

To learn more about the difference between empathy and sympathy, watch this great short video.
Watch hospital staff and patients share their stories of giving and receiving compassionate care at MedStar Washington Hospital Center with the Language of Caring for Staff program. “Compassion is as important as the treatment we are giving the patient,” says Dr. Zacharia Cherian. Patient Nanci Young says, “The warmth, the love, the caring attitude from the very first meeting was unbelievable.” Providers and staff agree that in making their hospital a better place for colleagues, patients and families: “We starts here, we starts now, we starts with us.”

― When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.‖
-- Ernest Hemingway

― The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy.‖
-- Meryl Streep

WHAT’S YOUR LINE?

Purpose: To take a break from being task-oriented and connect by learning more about each other.

Instructions

1. If your team has 10 people or fewer, do this with the whole group. Otherwise, divide into groups of 5.
2. Give the group(s) a sentence starter from the list below, or use your own.
3. Each person in the group completes the sentence. Listen carefully to each other.
4. Repeat at least five rounds with a different sentence starter each time.
5. Ask your team to suggest their own sentence starters.
6. Afterwards, invite reactions to the activity.

Suggested sentence starters:

a. The people who make me feel the best are those who...

b. The most important factor affecting my morale on my job is...

c. The greatest satisfaction I get from my job is...

d. If I could make one change in my work, it would be...

e. The most irritating part of my job is...

f. When something at work really aggravates me, I usually...

g. When I can’t get help with problems at work, I usually turn to...
Study: Computers and Paperwork Steal Time from Patients
Physicians spend almost twice as long doing electronic health records and desk work as they spend face-to-face with patients, according to a recently published study by the AMA and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health System. Even while in the exam room with patients, over a third of their time was spent on documentation tasks. Then physicians spend an additional hour or two of their personal time each night on data entry. “This study reveals what many physicians are feeling – data entry and administrative tasks are cutting into the doctor-patient time that is central to medicine and a primary reason many of us became physicians,” said AMA Immediate Past President Steven Stack, MD.

Are you attending the ANCC National Magnet Conference October 5-7 in Orlando, Florida? If you or a colleague will be there, come say hello to Jill Golde and Cheryl Glass of the Language of Caring team at Booth 734 to access great resources and learn about our patient experience solutions. Want to set a time to chat? Just email Jill at jgolde@languageofcaring.com or call 314-571-9607.

HealthStream’s Healthcare Improvement Forum Partnering to Achieve Outcomes in Nashville, October 26-28. Please join us! Language of Caring’s Dorothy Sisneros, Partner & SVP, Client Services and Jill Golde, Partner & SVP, Market Development will present a session called “Mindfulness, Empathy, and Engagement: The Soft Skills Revolution” on Thursday October 27 from 10:45 – 11:45 am EDT. You can sign up for the Summit by clicking here. If you want to meet with Dorothy or Jill in person, please reach out to them by email: Dorothy Sisneros – dsisneros@languageofcaring.com Jill Golde – jgolde@languageofcaring.com We hope to see you there.
How to Align Recognition Practices with Your Pursuit of the Great Patient Experience

It is human nature to want recognition for your strengths, accomplishments, hard work and contributions. Our employee survey results tell us that, while most of us recognize our teams for their efforts and results, our employees crave even more appreciation. In this webinar, we identify concrete ways to ensure that your recognition practices and programs align with, support and advance your organization’s values and the exceptional patient, family and employee experience.

**Highlights:**
- The elements of an appreciative culture
- Common myths and facts about employee recognition
- Tactics that spark commitment, engagement, and peak performance of individuals and teams
- Holiday Time: How your organization can promote meaningful gift-giving
- Our all-time favorite approaches

**WHO SHOULD ATTEND?**
- Patient experience champions, managers, supervisors, executives, physician leaders, practice managers, HR and employee engagement professionals, training and OD professionals.

**WEBINAR FACULTY**
Wendy Leebov, Jill Golde, and Dorothy Sisneros, Partners at Language of Caring, are passionate advocates for creating healing environments for patients, families, and the entire healthcare team. They’ve served as healthcare leaders, organization development professionals, instructional designers, strategists, and coaches. Together, they provide high-impact programs and consulting services, supporting healthcare organizations with culture change strategies, training and tools for enhancing the patient, family and employee experience.

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Spread the Resources
- Forward this month’s Heartbeat email to others.
- Share and tweet the following link:
  What Empathy is Not!

Join our LinkedIn Group “Quality Patient Experience and HCAHPS Improvement” and add to the rich discussions.

PLEASE FOLLOW US!

Language of Caring

Achieving an unparalleled patient experience and a culture of caring through exceptional communication.