Introduction

Healthcare is an exciting, varied and dynamic field, but is also full of challenges, demanding workloads and risks of complications, particularly as people’s lives literally depend on us! With an ageing population and increasing number of patients with various comorbidities, the multi-disciplinary approach is more important than ever.

In order to ensure the smooth running of such a complex team in healthcare, good team-working and leadership is vital. But as the saying goes: ‘with great power, comes great responsibility’ (Lee, 1962) and often with great responsibility comes physical, psychological and emotional stress. One of the first things I notice in a good leader is how they appreciate, befriend and respect all members of the team. More often than not, when individuals feel comfortable with their leader, the team spirit, enthusiasm and productivity all increase naturally. A calm level-headed approach alongside features described in the GMC guidelines such as: accountability and responsibility for the team, good organisation and management skills and of course good interpersonal and communication skills, are all required in a good leader. (General Medical Council, n.d.-b)

The term ‘Emotional Intelligence’ (EI) has been increasingly used over recent years to describe these attributes. EI is a relatively broad concept and it is generally sub-divided under the following main themes (Goleman, 1996):

- Self-awareness and control
- Appropriate expression
- Emotional interpretation and response

Although some inspirational leaders appear to have these skills naturally, EI is still something everyone can learn and develop. Through understanding, self-reflection and determination, individuals can become equipped with the tools they need to thrive in a leadership role.

Self-awareness

Every individual is unique and each of us interpret, react and cope with situations differently. A lot of how we cope with stress depends on our EI. The notion that emotions cloud our judgement isn’t necessarily true if we use emotions correctly.

Self-awareness and the art of reflection is encouraged throughout our careers to improve and develop our skills. Emotions are immensely important in how we interpret and react to a situation and in turn influence our capacity to manage it effectively. If something goes wrong, how many of us actually reflect and acknowledge how we are feeling in that instance? Instead, emotions are often side-lined in favour of the ‘practical brain’ in an attempt to power through to get the job done. But emotions can re-emerge later, or if suppressed,
can accumulate until we crumble. Alongside causing suffering to the individual, lack of acknowledging our emotions can weaken team spirit and impair productivity. Being aware of how we feel and how this influences our behaviour is crucial to being able to recognise one’s limitations, only after which we can improve. Greater insight into the self allows people to better interpret and appreciate other people’s emotions too.

3 Emotional expression

After understanding our own emotions, we need to release them in an appropriate, accurate and controlled manner. Some people struggle with this – perhaps due to lack of self-awareness or fear of ‘showing weakness.’ Emotional expression is integral to developing trust, another key feature described in the GMC’s ‘Good Medical Practice’. General Medical Council, n.d.-a) Through sharing our feelings, we can gain better insight to others and ourselves. But emotions need to be conveyed appropriately. Excessive suppression is known to be harmful to oneself and team. Conversely, over-expression can be inappropriate and potentially disrupt the smooth running of work. This is why it is important to lead by example. When a team leader appropriately expresses their emotions to their team, positive praise provides encouragement to continue the good work and negative emotions help problems to be identified and resolved. Emotional expression increases approachability of a leader if the team are ever in need. This in turn may help leaders to understand the strengths and weaknesses of team members and hence allow better delegation of roles.

4 Interpreting other people’s emotions

Empathy and the ability to recognise emotional cues are key traits required to treat patients in a holistic manner. But sometimes in a busy, time-pressured schedule in 21st century medicine, it is easy to shift the balance to a more mechanical and less emotive approach. As a patient, I remember and appreciate doctors who showed they genuinely care.

Skills like active listening and responding appropriately to emotional cues increase patient comfort and may facilitate a smoother consultation. This is equally important in team working and leadership. Some of the best leaders I’ve observed make genuine efforts to know and understand each member of the team. As a medical student, I am often intimidated by new environments and new people – especially when put amidst seniors. The best clinical placements have always been those where doctors notice this discomfort and rather than declaring us ‘incompetent students’ instead encourage us to become actively involved. In a supportive and active experience, not only do we as students gain better learning opportunities, but we become greater assets to the medical team. Through the process of reflecting on various experiences, analysing my strengths and weaknesses and acknowledging feedback from peers, I have learnt a great deal about myself as a leader and team-player. Now more than ever, I have come to appreciate the importance of EI in leadership and in healthcare.

Author statements

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References


