

Elevating healthcare with emotional intelligence: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence (EI), which includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management, is crucial for health-care professionals to deal with highly stressful and emotional situations. It makes it easier to recognise and regulate personal and patient emotions, as well as to make better decisions, manage stress, strengthen patient relationships and achieve better treatment outcomes. The pandemic underscored the need for EI training to boost healthcare professionals' resilience, communication and efficacy in patient care. A complete approach encompassing support, motivation, protection, education and technology is recommended to improve healthcare workers' well-being and prepare the healthcare system for future difficulties.

Keywords: Cognitive intelligence, COVID-19, emotional intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence (EI) is an invisible yet powerful component of the healthcare industry. The importance of EI becomes apparent in the stressful environment of hospital life, where emotions frequently peak and problems abound. This feature is most noticeable in communication between medical personnel and patients, especially during unpleasant conversations. Medical personnel such as doctors, nurses and laboratory technicians must deal with the stress of their demanding occupations while avoiding burnout.


The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about new emotional complexities in the hospital settings. This crisis has placed financial, psychological and physical stress on healthcare professionals. During these volatile times, EI has become a crucial tool for healthcare professionals and everyone to manage these unexpected challenges properly. The pandemic has tested the endurance of the healthcare industry, leaving

many staff members needing rest. In such situations, the importance of EI is evident. Here, we examine the relevance of EI for healthcare professionals and how it affects the individuals they contact.

While most people are familiar with the term intelligence quotient (IQ), EI may not be as common amongst healthcare professionals. Salovey and Mayer^[1] first established the idea of EI in 1990, defining it as the ability to identify, control and evaluate the feelings of oneself and others, later popularised by psychologist Daniel Goleman^[2] in his book, which emphasised its essential qualities. EI has long been recognised as an important aspect of economic success.^[3] Despite centuries of thinking that cognitive IQ is vital to success, recent research suggests otherwise. EI is highly linked to exceptional leadership qualities, job satisfaction and effective communication skills.^[4]

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare organisations have faced growing complications and persistent challenges, emphasising the importance of healthcare leaders developing and applying EI abilities effectively.^[5] Leaders with a strong foundation in EI are vital for navigating these problems, as they are skilled at constructively identifying, comprehending, managing and utilising their emotions. While there is widespread agreement on the importance of EI, the debate over the specific characteristics that define this skill continues. Mayer and Salovey's four-branch model stands out as it provides an easy-to-understand approach to EI. It identifies four critical mental abilities required for healthcare leadership and practice: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness/empathy and relationship management.^[1] This framework provides an understanding of the practical applications of EI domains.

SELF-AWARENESS

Awareness of emotions (self-awareness) is critical in healthcare, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Self-awareness allows healthcare professionals to better understand themselves, how others see them and how they fit into a wider community. This is critical for people dealing with difficult emotional situations, such as worries regarding patient outcomes, the possibility of contracting the virus, feeling inadequate and arguments with co-workers. The intense demands of healthcare professionals, such as working long hours, closely caring for patients and operating in a high-pressure workplace, contribute to stress and the risk of burnout. Self-awareness is essential under these circumstances.

Research has shown that self-awareness can increase confidence, decision-making abilities and stress management.^[6] Even though many of us believe we understand our emotions well, research shows that only

a few people do so.^[7] This discrepancy between what we think we know about our sentiments and facts could give rise to misunderstandings and premature, unfair decisions at work. Healthcare professionals can better understand their emotional reactions and those around them by thinking and asking probing questions about their feelings and thoughts, which helps them control their emotions and enhances their interactions with co-workers and patients.

Consider a doctor who is working hard during a pandemic and begins to show signs of exhaustion and burnout. Realisation of this is an important step. It encourages them to care for themselves by practising mindfulness or taking breaks. These behaviours offer them time to reflect on their well-being, find strategies to reduce stress and demonstrate the importance of self-awareness in healthcare. By understanding their emotional state, healthcare staff can better deal with the pandemic's persistent pressures, such as lack of sleep and the emotional burden of constantly caring for patients.^[8]

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Self-management is vital for healthcare personnel because it allows them to deal with job issues thoughtfully and calmly, especially during difficult periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Pausing and thinking before reacting to and managing one's emotions in difficult situations are essential skills in healthcare because the work is challenging and a lot is at stake [Figure 1].

The brain contains components such as the amygdala and neocortex, which are essential for stress management. Our emotions can sometimes take over our logical reasoning, a phenomenon known as 'emotional hijacking', causing us to make rash decisions. Knowing this helps us understand why it is critical to have coping mechanisms for our immediate emotional reactions.^[1] The ability to pause, think and

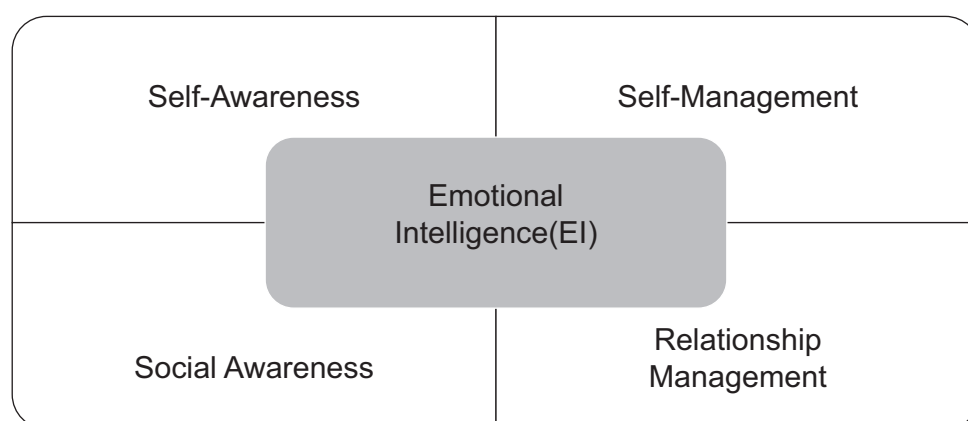


Figure 1: Emotional intelligence domains. EI: Emotional intelligence

choose a more considered answer benefits healthcare professionals' health and further enhances patient care and safety.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for techniques to control emotions,^[9] such as mindfulness and support from co-workers, to deal with the enormous stress and emotional strain that healthcare personnel face.^[10] These strategies do more than simply make us feel better right now; they also help us gain strength over time, which is critical for dealing with current and future healthcare challenges.

Self-management has been linked to improved patient outcomes and fewer medical errors. For instance, surgeons adept at controlling their emotions and stress are less likely to experience problems that could endanger themselves and their patients.^[11] Furthermore, mindfulness-based programmes have demonstrated favourable results in helping healthcare personnel better control their emotions, allowing them to cope with stress and maintain a high standard of care.^[12]

SOCIAL AWARENESS/EMPATHY

Empathy, or the ability to comprehend and experience what others are going through, is essential for interacting with others, particularly in healthcare, enabling doctors and patients to build strong, meaningful interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of empathy, as healthcare professionals were stressed and observed patients experiencing difficult times. According to previous studies, empathy declines amongst medical students and professionals as they advance in their jobs, perhaps due to a lack of compassionate role models to look forward to,^[13] which affects the care they deliver and speaks to a bigger problem in how medical education and practice are structured, stressing the need for adjustments, including training.

Research has shown that empathy improves patient satisfaction and outcomes.^[14] Simple behaviours, such as making eye contact, acknowledging patients' feelings and communicating respectfully and effectively, particularly when conveying unpleasant news, are critical for improving patients' experiences. These activities make patients feel better about their care and improve their long-term health outcomes.

The pandemic has brought attention to the lack of empathy and communication skills, demonstrating the urgent need to incorporate empathy into healthcare education and practice.^[15] Training and emphasising patient-centred care show great promise for developing empathy amongst healthcare staff. Furthermore, the benefits of empathy, such

as fewer legal claims against doctors and improved doctor-patient interactions, are critical to healthcare's economic and social elements.^[16]

SOCIAL/RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Strong social skills are crucial in healthcare. These abilities, which include developing positive connections, resolving problems and leading teams, have become particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. This experience has demonstrated how important it is for healthcare professionals to manage their emotions and those of colleagues and patients. Maintaining high-quality care and preventing misinformation requires effective communication. According to previous studies, most complaints against doctors are due to poor communication rather than their competence in delivering medical care.^[17] In addition, doctors with lower EI face legal actions more frequently,^[18] demonstrating a direct link between high social skills and professional performance.

Conflicts in healthcare are often caused by how opinions are conveyed rather than the beliefs themselves. Creating an environment in which everyone feels heard and valued, even with opposing opinions, is critical for patient care and a happy workplace. The epidemic has also emphasised how healthcare teams perceive teamwork and communication differently,^[19] highlighting the need for improved cooperation and understanding in teams comprising multiple specialities. Making eye contact, expressing interest and using body language are nonverbal communications that help connect with colleagues and patients. Improving these nonverbal signals can significantly affect how we collaborate and care for patients.

Reflecting on what we have learned from the epidemic, it is evident that healthcare needs to prioritise social skills to face future difficulties. Improving communication, EI and cooperation can help respond to crises and strengthen healthcare. Training healthcare professionals in these areas will result in enhanced patient care, fewer legal issues and a workplace that promotes high-quality healthcare.

Acknowledging and managing one's emotions and those of others are crucial for the future, as healthcare professionals appreciate the significance of EI in their personal development, interpersonal interactions and work performance.

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

EI training for healthcare personnel is critical, especially concerning healthcare issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

These problematic circumstances affect healthcare staff's ability to cope with stress, communicate effectively and offer excellent patient care. A large body of research supports the notion that EI skills, which are critical for dealing with the emotional difficulties of healthcare, may be significantly improved with correct training programmes. Studies on trait or competency models of EI demonstrate that such training can increase EI levels while also improving healthcare professionals' mental health, relationships and job performance.^[20] This evidence points to the powerful impact of EI training, making healthcare professionals more equipped to meet the demands of their jobs with strength and compassion.^[1]

Practical EI training frequently employs a variety of teaching modalities, including lectures, group discussions, demonstrations, role-playing and hands-on exercises, all conducted in a supportive group setting. This holistic method attempts to improve fundamental EI skills, such as understanding and recognising emotions, which are critical for patient care and teamwork. One prominent programme by Nelis *et al.* exemplifies this, with group sessions supplemented with personal diary keeping and bi-weekly emails to assist participants in using EI abilities in their daily work.^[21] The mental health problems that healthcare professionals have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the crucial need for a comprehensive plan to address these issues. This strategy should include support, motivation, safety, education and technology.^[22] Supportive measures must bring together various stakeholders, including families, governments, communities, organisations and co-workers, to form a strong support network that fulfils persons' emotional and psychological needs.^[23]

Motivational initiatives are equally vital, including rewarding hard work, instilling a feeling of duty and promoting relaxation techniques to reduce psychological stress.^[24] We must also be protected, which includes proper protective gear, access to nutritious food and water and time for rest and safe relaxation.^[25] Education plays a pivotal role by using online platforms to offer psychological education, stress management and EI skill training, which not only aids professional growth but also boosts professional resilience.^[26]

Technology and online services have become indispensable as a means to provide support while lowering infection risks and making better use of healthcare professionals' time.

Telemedicine, video conferencing, social media and mobile health apps have grown in popularity for delivering education, counselling and support to healthcare professionals, allowing for a more adaptive and rapid response to their mental health

needs.^[27] Furthermore, artificial intelligence is emerging as a tool for identifying persons at risk of suicide or other emergencies, which will increase the support system for healthcare professionals during a pandemic.^[28]

By adopting a comprehensive and diverse approach to the mental health and overall well-being of healthcare professionals, we can construct a stronger and more resilient healthcare system that is prepared to address current and future problems.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating EI training into healthcare professionals' growth and development plans has become critical, particularly in light of global health problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare systems can meet the needs of employees by using a combination of supporting, motivational, protective, educational and technological methods, ensuring their mental health and overall well-being.

Reflecting on the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident that prioritising EI and mental health in healthcare professionals is critical to preparing for and handling future public health emergencies effectively. We are creating a more resilient system by allocating resources to improve EI amongst healthcare professionals. This system will survive crises while also being caring for, sensitive and efficient in meeting the requirements of patients and the community as a whole.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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