

# Implementing Empathy

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# Empathy = The ability to understand and share the feelings of another

## Origin

Early 20th century: from Greek *empathēia* (*em-* 'in' and *pathos* 'feeling') translated into German as *Einfühlung*

## Clinical empathy

Physician's/careperson's capacity of correctly acknowledging the emotional state of a patient/colleague without experiencing that state oneself (Halpern, 2003, *J Gen Intern Med*, 18(8): 670-674)



# Context

- technology oriented medical care
- new medico-legal directives
- increasingly constraining procedures
- hospital understaffing and *burn-out* syndrome
- end-of-life care market





Is there still room for empathy  
in public medical care ?



# Why do we need empathy in medical care ?

- Empathy reduces stress and anxiety in patients

(Choi et al., 2016, *Intervent Pulmonology*, 92: 380-388)

- Empathy is positively correlated with patient satisfaction with the care service provider

(Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Gruber, 2009, *Health Communication*, 16(3): 363-389)



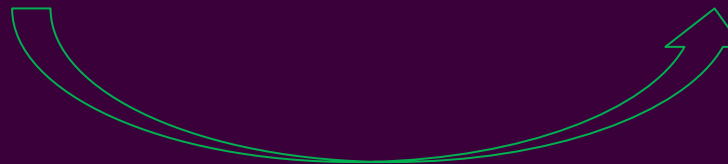
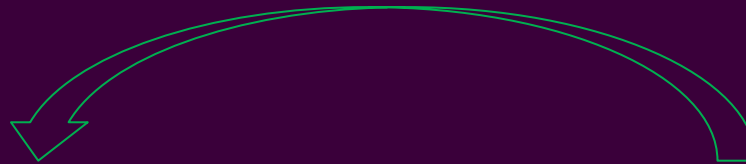
# More empathy, less stress, less anxiety!

(Wanzer et al., 2009, Health Communication, 16(3): 363-389)

Physicians/Staff



Patients



# More stress, more anxiety, less empathy!

(Arceneaux, 2017, J Exp Political Sci, 4(1): 68-80)

Physicians/Staff



Patients



# Implementing Empathy

(Dresp-Langley, Kunz et al. (J Medical Ethics, in preparation))

## A = Acknowledge

- foster collective **awareness** (science for society)
- identify **origin** (evolution)
- identify **mechanisms** (biopsychology, behaviour theory)
- recognize **empathy as a survival-relevant response**





# Implementing Empathy

(Dresp-Langley, Kunz et al. (J Medical Ethics, in preparation))

## A = Acknowledge

- **anxiety** and **empathy** are conditioned biopsychological responses
- they are **universal** and grounded in **evolution**



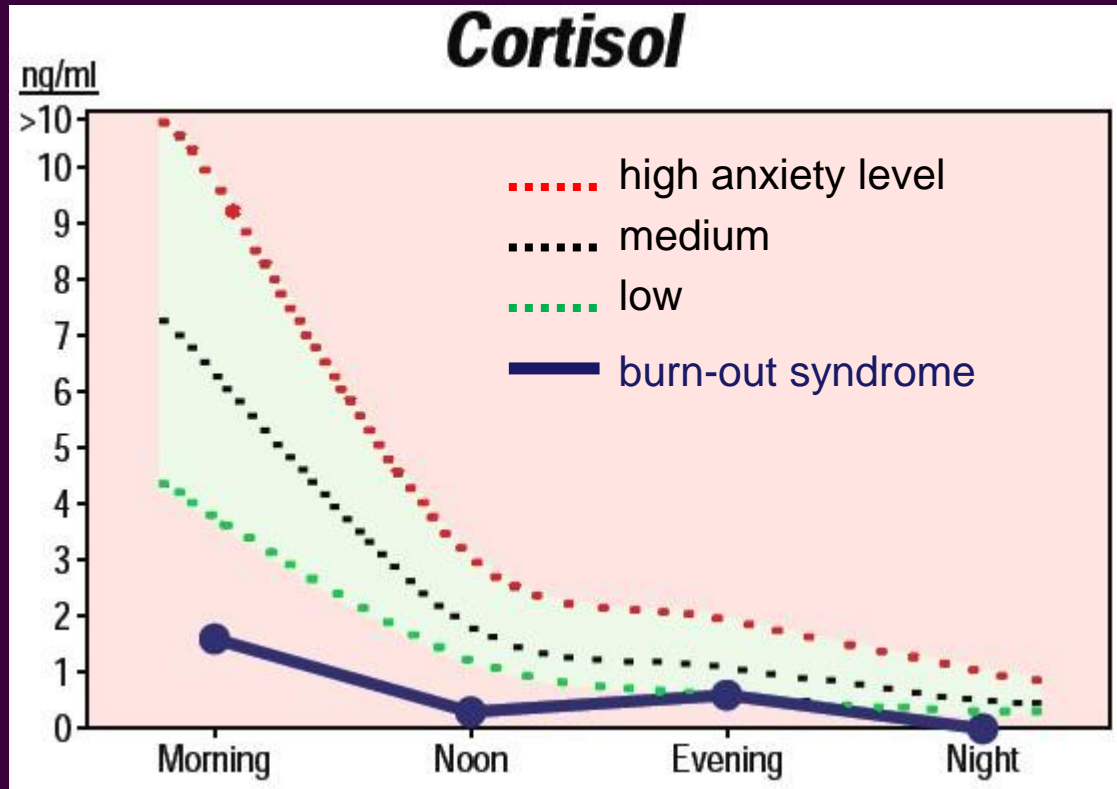
# Getting fed is not enough.....



Harlow & Zimmermann, 1959,  
*Science*, 130: 3373

- physical clinging to a furry surrogate is essential to the survival of baby primates separated from their mothers at birth
- when food only is provided, baby primates develop intense **anxiety** syndromes, stop eating, and let themselves die
- this intense stress response is correlated with a massive increase in **corticosterone**  
- after several days the « system shuts down »





National Institute of Health, USA, 2016

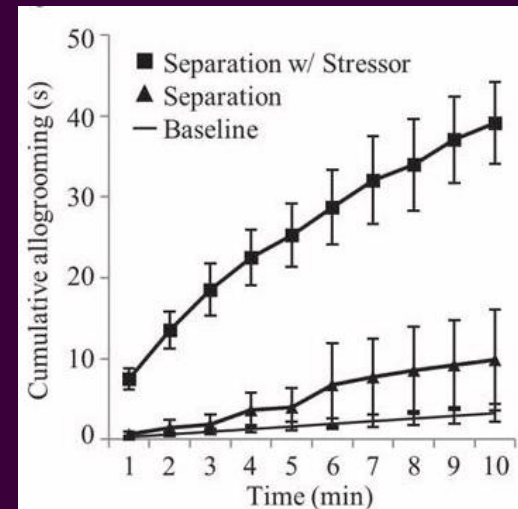




## There, there.....

- rodent recovering from stress gets comforted spontaneously (**empathic allogrooming**) by another rodent who witnessed the stressful treatment

Burkett et al., 2016, Science, 351: 375-378



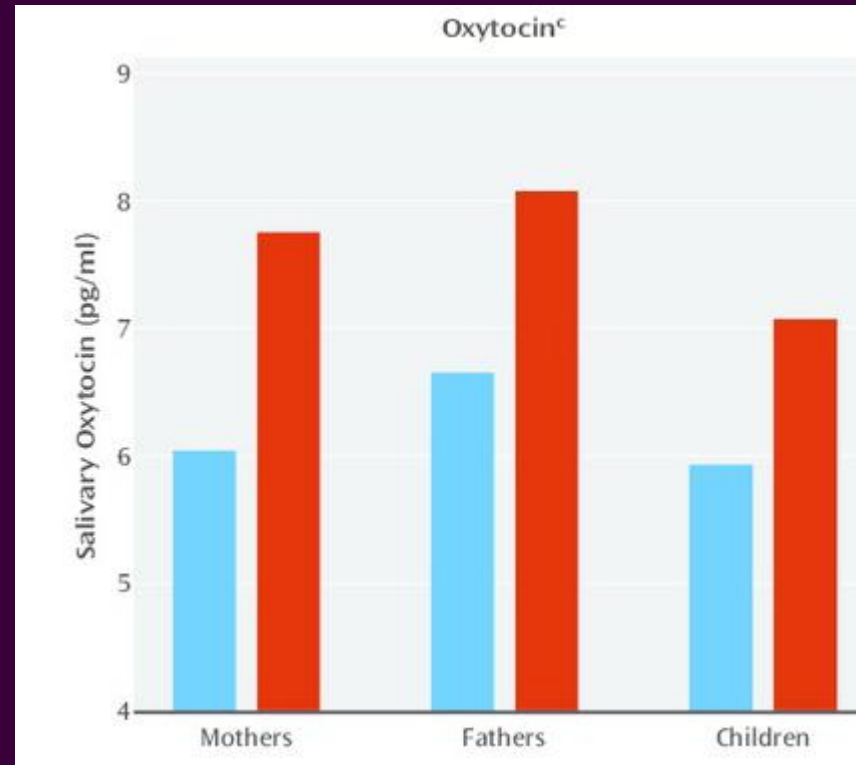
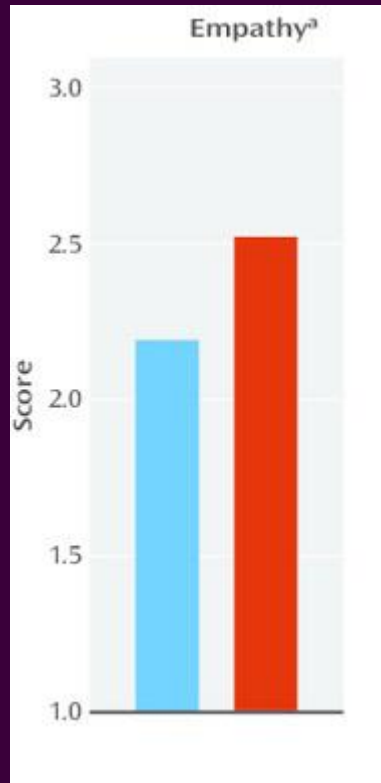


The **empathic response** towards the other increases **oxytocin** levels significantly in the giving animal (« self-gratification »)

Empathy is the most natural response to our own and others' distress – individuals without empathy are freaks of nature

(Darwin, 1871, The Descent of Man)





■ chronic stress  
■ no stress

National Institute of Health, USA, 2014



# Implementing Empathy

(Dresp-Langley, Kunz et al. (J Medical Ethics, in preparation))

## A = Assess

- **Beck's Anxiety Inventory (B. A. I.)**
- from cognitive behavior therapy
- 21 items, total score 63 (« severe anxiety »)
- **VERY** easy to implement (online)



- high B. A. I. anxiety scores
- high « death hormone » levels
- no empathy
- poor service provider ratings

Physicians/Staff



Patients





- low B. A. I. anxiety scores
- high « life hormone » levels
- empathy enriched environment
- excellent service provider ratings

Physicians/Staff



Patients



# Implementing Empathy

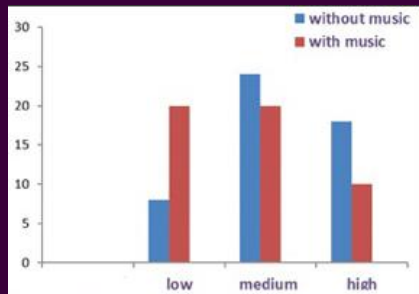
(Dresp-Langley, Kunz et al. (J Medical Ethics, in preparation))

## C = Communicate

- med school training essentially based on verbal
- not easy to implement
- other channels (sound, touch) could be more effective
- implementation requires **managerial motivation!**



Nilsson U, Unosson M, Rawal N., 2005, Stress reduction in patients exposed to calming music postoperatively: a randomized controlled trial. *Eur J Anaesthesiol*, 22(2):96-102.



Turner et al, 2008, Effect of therapeutic touch on pain and anxiety in patients. *J Adv Nursing*, 28(1): 10-20.



# Dr. Steinberg and his trained « palliative pooches »

“It is human nature to treat people differently when they are sick... but dogs live in the moment, sharing joy regardless of the situation.”

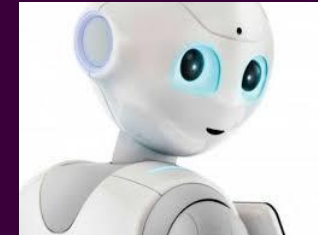
—Karl Steinberg, MD, CMD, HMDC

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# The future of compassion in medical care:

## «Empathybots»



# However.....

« ..... only the establishment of a truly caring and empathic relationship between the **physician** and his/her **patient** has the potential of producing **trust** in the healthcare systems of tomorrow »

Berg et al., 2007

