

THE PROCESS OF DESENSITIZATION IN MEDICAL STUDENTS AND THE LOSS OF EMPATHY THAT FOLLOWS

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What is Desensitization

- A form of self-protection or a coping method to help deal with the pain and trauma the students witness while dealing with patients
- Also known as “putting up a wall,” medical students start to detach themselves from the emotions and hardships they are exposed to



Becoming Desensitized

- Studies show that the main factors causing medical students to go through the process of desensitization include (Hojat et al., 2009)
 - Need to pull away from emotional pain experienced with patients
 - Poor or negative role models
 - Lack of sleep
 - Negative educational experiences
 - Harassments faced in the school and hospital
 - Overly demanding patients
 - Lack of time to process what they are dealing with and limited outlets to talk to



Is Desensitization Necessary?

- Some students feel that this process of pulling away is necessary to stay clinically neutral while working
- Students try to focus on the problem at hand rather than the person as a whole to attempt to complete their work the most efficient way possible
 - Fail to consider their patients feelings and forgo their spiritual, emotional and personal needs (Kuczewski, 2014)



The Importance of Empathy

- Empathy helps with building patient-physician relationships
- Can lead to personal growth and optimal outcomes in work
- Allows for students and workers to connect with patients and can aid them mentally while treating them physically (Kuczewski et al, 2014)
- Can help gain patient trust, reduce a patients' anxiety and improve health outcomes (Newton, 2013)





When Empathy is Lost

- Studies have found that there is a significant decline in empathy scores during the third year of medical schools (Hojat et al., 2009)
 - This is typically when students start their clinical rotations, and are interacting with patients, meaning they need more empathy as they assist those they are taking care of
- Medical school can result in the “stunt of moral growth and increased cynicism,” leading to negative relationships with patients as a result (Newton, 2013)
- Third year students undergo cadaver dissections (Tseng et al., 2015)
 - Some students start to objectify the cadaver the more they dissect it
 - This objectifying a human follows them into the hospital and workforce



How It Impacts Their Works and Lives

- Students tend to “down-regulate,” meaning they suppress their negative emotions they feel while working (Newton, 2013)
 - Can impact their effectiveness on the job and their mental health
- Many students are concerned that they are becoming insensitive to the personal needs of those in their care (Kuczewski et al, 2014)
- Decline in empathy was found to continue through graduation and even worsen through postgraduate training and into residency, with the cynical outlook deepening the more experience the individuals gained (Hojat et al., 2019)



What Actions Are Being Taken

- Some universities are starting to take action to combat this loss of empathy in their students (Schweller, 2014)
- One university has started conducting simulated medical consultations
 - Allowed for students to reflect on themselves and the patient they cared for; allowing for an emotional connection to be made
 - Students were able to gain closure, typically do not get to experience when working in a fast-paced environment
 - Felt more comfortable reaching out to fellow students and mentors
 - Empathy levels improved



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