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The role of emotional desensitization in physician burnout

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Statement of the Problem: “Physician burnout” is a pressing mental health concern. Although not a formal diagnosis in the DSM, physician burnout is associated with higher rates of depression, substance use disorder and suicide. A 2011 American study found that physicians are significantly more likely than other working adults to experience professional burnout. This study found that of 7288 physicians across America, nearly 50% reported to be suffering from at least one symptom of professional burnout. A leading cause of burnout is often deemed to be emotional exhaustion (feeling too much); however, the influence of emotional desensitization (not feeling enough) on physician burnout has not been adequately investigated.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: We conducted individual semi-structured interviews with general internists in one Canadian city. We asked physicians to share both theoretical opinions and personal narratives regarding emotional attachment or detachment in patient care and its possible influence on burnout. We analyzed transcripts iteratively, coding them thematically within an exploratory constructivist framework until we reached theoretical saturation.

Findings: We found discrepancies between physicians’ intellectual opinions and personal narratives. Many physicians articulated the belief that emotional attachments with patients lead to burnout and compromise patient care. However, physicians’ narratives suggested that the experience of forming emotional connections with patients enhanced their sense of meaning and satisfaction in medicine, and even improved the quality of their medical care.

Conclusion & Significance: Physician burnout is a major problem today and it is incumbent upon us to search for a root cause. Our study challenges conventional assumptions about the presumed importance of ‘affective neutrality’ in medicine. It suggests that forming emotional attachments with patients might protect against physician burnout and enhance the quality of patient care. These findings have important implications for medical education and practice alike.

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Dysfunctional attitude and performance anxiety among university students from Iran and Pakistan

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The present research explored relationship between dysfunctional attitude and performance anxiety in Iranian and Pakistani University students. The study also explored an interesting culture and gender similarities and differences in Iranian and Pakistani University students. For this purpose, a total sample of 1500 students was taken including equal numbers from Iran and Pakistan with an age range of 20-40 years. The data were collected from public universities of Iran (Isfahan and Kashan) and Pakistan (University of the Punjab and Government College University). The dysfunctional attitude of participants was assessed through Dysfunctional Attitude Scale. The performance anxiety level of participants was assessed by State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was employed to assess relationship between dysfunctional attitude and anxieties. The independent t-test was employed to see culture differences and gender differences among students. The findings indicated that dysfunctional attitude had significant positive relationship with state-trait anxiety in Pakistani and Iranian samples. The findings also revealed that trait anxiety and state anxiety have significant positive relationship with each other. In terms of gender differences, the findings revealed that Pakistani men showed more dysfunctional attitude of achievement than Pakistani women. No gender differences found in dysfunctional attitude of achievement in Iranian University students. In terms of culture differences, the findings indicated that Iranian students are more likely to have dysfunctional attitude of achievement and state anxiety as compared to Pakistani students. The present research strongly recommended treating performance anxiety by using cognitive-behavior therapy in which students learn to perform more effectively following prolonged exposure to an audience.

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