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Preparing for a Career in Health Care? Then You Need to Understand Emotional Intelligence

12 March 2015

What could be more important than intelligence? It helps us get good grades in school, admissions into the colleges we most want to attend and, hopefully, a successful and rewarding career. But there is more to consider for a successful career in health care than intelligence.

According to a study that tracked graduate students over 40 years, what we now call "emotional intelligence" was four times more important than IQ in determining professional success.

What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Social psychologist Peter Salovey (now president of Yale University) and psychologist John D. Mayer coined the term "emotional intelligence" in 1990. They described emotional intelligence as "a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action."

Put simply, it is the ability to recognize, understand and deal with one's own and others' emotions constructively.

Why Do I Need It?

An article on the *Becker's Hospital Review* website described this scenario: "Imagine a patient with a bad reaction to anesthesia. It's fairly routine but still uncomfortable and unnerving for the patient and the family. One nurse may be highly conscientious and clinically competent and taking all the right steps to address the situation. She'll provide the right treatment and the patient's symptoms will resolve, but she doesn't attempt to calm the patient or instill a sense of confidence and even fails to pick up on the anxiety. Another nurse may not be quite as conscientious or experienced. She may even take a bit longer to figure out exactly what to do, but she is more comforting. She knows to put a hand on the patient's shoulder and to assure the family that this is normal. The symptoms may resolve in the same amount of time, but the two patient and family experiences were very different."

In the health professions, emotional intelligence enables health care practitioners to work as members of a team and provide compassionate, empathic care to their patients. In fact, beginning in April 2015, pre-med students will take a revised MCAT, the test for entry into medical school, which will place more emphasis on topics like sociology, psychology and the humanities.

Even if you aren't dealing with patients in your job, emotional intelligence is still important because you will be dealing with colleagues, supervisors and people you provide services to, among others.

Can I Learn Emotional Intelligence?

Anyone can nurture and improve their emotional intelligence. Like other kinds of learning, it takes work and attention.

Keep in mind that the idea is not to erase all negative emotions. They are part of the workplace and every other sphere of our lives. Rather, the goal is to learn how to deal with all of the emotions that we experience, negative and positive, and not let them get in the way.

Use these core skills to build your emotional intelligence:

Increase self-awareness.

- ▶ Keep a journal.
- ▶ Find people you trust to give you feedback.

Be responsible.

- ▶ When problems arise, contribute to creating solutions.
- ▶ Be persistent in the face of obstacles.
- ▶ Take responsibility for your actions. If you make a mistake or hurt someone, apologize and make amends.

Regulate your emotions.

- ▶ Talk to yourself kindly. When you criticize yourself constantly, you are likely to criticize others as well.
- ▶ Take time for reflection and meditation.
- ▶ Figure out the best ways to decrease anger and irritation when they occur so you can respond to those situations calmly. You may need to count to 10 (or 100), ask for time alone (go for a walk or into a quiet space) or do something else to calm down.

Learn to empathize.

- ▶ Be interested in those around you.
- ▶ Take the time to understand those you deal with daily, such as your parents, siblings, teachers and friends. Try to figure out why they behave the way they do. What motivates them? Why might they respond to you in unexpected ways? How can you work with them to understand each other better?

Cooperate and collaborate.

- ▶ Give people speaking to you your complete attention. Don't drift into thinking about your response or your to-do list. Consider what may be "between the lines" of what they are saying.
- ▶ Look for opportunities to work with others collaboratively.

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- ▶ Volunteer in your community.

Show appreciation.

- ▶ Express gratitude to those who help you.
- ▶ Write thank-you notes.
- ▶ Praise people spontaneously (and honestly. Flattery is not a sign of emotional intelligence.)
- ▶ Write down what you are grateful for daily or every couple of days.

Learn More

- ▶ 5 Ways to Boost Your Emotional Intelligence
- ▶ Developing Emotional Intelligence
- ▶ Emotional Intelligence – EQ
- ▶ Emotional Intelligence in Medicine
- ▶ Emotional Intelligence (EQ): Key Skills for Raising Emotional Intelligence
- ▶ Emotional Intelligence: A New Requirement for Physicians
- ▶ How Emotionally Intelligent Are You? Here's How To Tell
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