

Rx for better health care: Kindness and compassion

November 24 2014, by Kathleen Doheny, Healthday Reporter



Data suggests that gentler, thoughtful approach helps boost patient outcomes, experts say.

(HealthDay)—Want to give health care a boost? Try a little kindness, experts say.

Various studies suggest that when health care workers approach patients with compassion, patients often heal faster, have less pain and anxiety, and even bounce back faster from common colds.

"When health care is delivered with [kindness](#) and compassion, it has a significantly greater effect than when it is given in a dispassionate fashion that assumes that the human connection has no benefit," said Dr. James Doty, founder and director of Stanford University School of Medicine's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and

Education.

While medicine holds the power to cure, he said, how it is delivered can make a huge difference—not just for patients but for [health care providers](#), too.

Doty based his comments on a review of the published research on kindness and compassion in medical care. He presented the findings earlier this month at the Compassion and Healthcare Conference in San Francisco.

According to Doty, human evolution may be key to explaining why kindness matters in health care. That's because humans evolved to include the nurturing of offspring. So, when someone nurtures someone in need, Doty said, the "feel-good" hormone, oxytocin, is released in the patient's brain. That may help patients feel less anxious and tense, translating to lowered perceptions of pain.

Displaying compassionate care is simple, Doty said. For example, "those who practice this [know to] lean toward the patient," he said, sending the patient the message that their doctor or other provider is interested.

"We know you can express concern by simple touch," said Doty, who is also a professor of neurosurgery at Stanford.

Staff can also help a patient feel cared for when they avoid the impression that they are rushed, Doty said.

In the literature review, Doty found research showing that compassionate treatment helped not only to reduce pain and anxiety but it was also tied to lower blood pressure, shorter hospital stays and even reduced the severity and length of the common cold.

Improved cooperation may be one reason: The research showed that when patients viewed a health care provider as compassionate, that boosted the odds that the patient would follow a doctor's recommendations.

Doty said health care workers also tended to feel more engaged and useful in this type of caring environment.

But who's tracking "kindness" in today's health care industry? Doty said that while some national surveys monitor health care settings and how they are serving patients, they don't drill down to levels of compassion. Through his work with the center at Stanford, Doty said he's begun to meet with insurers to explain how offering care in a kind way can boost outcomes.

Another expert in the field agreed that caring delivery is crucial to better patient outcomes.

Emiliana Simon-Thomas is science director of the Greater Good Science Center based at the University of California, Berkeley. She said a key message from the collected research on kindness is that compassion in health care is a two-way street.

That means that patients who are looking for more [compassion](#) in their care should be more compassionate themselves—seeking to understand the stresses [health care workers](#) are under.

That may mean taking the time to listen to your doctor, even if you're getting unwelcome news, Simon-Thomas said.

And what if the relationship between a patient and his or her [health care](#) provider isn't working? According to Simon-Thomas, [patients](#) who find themselves with a provider who is not compassionate should feel free to

request another one, but not in a combative way.

"Too often people get angry and combative, to their own disservice, when it is much more effective to gently ask for what you need, and express how an interpersonal dynamic is making you feel," she said.

For instance, a woman who is overweight and told by her doctor she'll have a heart attack if she doesn't get serious about weight loss might feel hurt and depressed. According to Simon-Thomas, she could first thank the doctor for his advice, then tell him how his manner makes her feel, and then ask for another doctor with whom she might connect more easily.

More information: There's more on compassion at the [Greater Good Science Center](#).

Copyright © 2014 [HealthDay](#). All rights reserved.

Citation: Rx for better health care: Kindness and compassion (2014, November 24) retrieved 3 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-rx-health-kindness-compassion.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--