

Patients with immediate medical needs tend to perceive doctors as emotionless, study finds

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When a patient is in urgent need of a doctor for illness or injury, expecting that doctor to help is natural.

But a new study , published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, finds that the greater [patients'](#) need for [medical care](#), the more likely patients will view their [doctors](#) as "empty vessels," devoid of emotions or personal lives of their own; at the same time, those patients expect their [physicians](#) to be able to contain the patients' emotions and experiences.

The study is unusual in that most research focuses on the reverse—how physicians view patients.

In "The 'Empty Vessel' Physician: Physicians' Instrumentality Makes Them Seem Personally Empty," by University of Chicago Booth School of Business Professor Ayelet Fishbach and former Chicago Booth PhD graduate Juliana Schroeder (currently faculty at University of California at Berkeley) designed a series of six studies to test how instrumentality—or the importance of a doctors' role in a patient's health— influences how patients perceive their physicians. The experiments find that when patients are in immediate need of a physician, they don't view their doctor as a human being with emotions. At the same time, these patients think that their doctors should empathize with them and feel patients' emotions.

"When people really need to see a doctor, whether it is for something immediate such as a broken bone or a life threatening illness, they look at the doctor in terms of their own health goals and not as a person with emotions," said Fishbach. "When patients 'objectify' their doctors—when they treat them like objects or machines—it can have negative consequences and lead to burnout."

In all six studies, the results were replicated. Participants in higher need for care believed physicians had fewer personal emotions, but they wanted the physicians to be focused on their emotions.

Indeed, 46 percent of U.S. physicians report experiencing at least one symptom of burnout, according to a recent nationally representative sample survey. And physicians in specialties on the front lines of health care seem to be at greatest risk.

"The downside of not seeing your doctors' emotions is that they don't feel acknowledged," said Fishbach. "If patients are sensitive to their doctors' emotions, they could get better care."

More information: *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, [spp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../50615597976.full.pdf](https://sagepub.com/content/early/.../50615597976.full.pdf)

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