

# The Heart of the Art: Emotional Intelligence in Nursing

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### ABSTRACT

Emotional labor has long been recognized as a necessary part of nursing practice. Nurses often provide care for patients and families who are suffering and where emotions are heightened. Emotions play an important role in the relationship and communication between nurses, patients and families. Nowadays nursing is becoming more and more technical. The rational mind and the emotional mind need to be balanced partners for the nurse-patient relationship to be harmonious. Every nursing intervention is affected by the master aptitude of emotional intelligence. People who are emotionally intelligent see themselves as more optimistic, as they are better able to understand, manipulate, and regulate their emotions. This paper reflects on how emotional intelligence contributes immensely to the art and craft of nursing which is a practice discipline.

*Keywords: [Emotional Intelligence, Nursing, Nursing students]*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nursing profession is an occupation with a high level of emotional labour.<sup>[1]</sup> Nursing profession can be regarded as a difficult profession because of the fact that it requires making vital decisions and due to the negative feelings during this process.<sup>[2]</sup> Nursing is a profession which deals with people directly on a day to day basis. Training the nursing students as future professional nurses is always a major concern of the nursing centres globally. The holistic compassionate care which the nurses provide are not only the result of the knowledge based on the disease condition, but also is the outcome of a person's emotional intelligence.<sup>[3]</sup> We are living in "an age of uncertainty", and thus nurses require to be more emotionally intelligent.

In an effort to create a scientific test for understanding the variations between people's abilities in the areas of emotions, two American University professors, Dr. John Mayer and Dr. Peter Salovey, coined the word emotional intelligence in 1990. However, another American psychologist, Daniel Goleman, is credited with popularizing the idea of emotional intelligence through his 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Should Matter More Than I.Q.*<sup>[4]</sup> Emotional intelligence (EI) is "the ability of the individual to understand his own feelings, to empathize with the others' emotions, and to regulate their feelings to enrich his life". The five basic skills or/ dimensions for EI are; self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy, relationship management and effective communication.<sup>[5]</sup> Self Awareness – paying more attention to our inner thoughts and feelings, naming the good and bad emotions, and consciously acknowledging that they will alter; Self-Motivation – seeing beyond the immediate problems and pushing oneself to effectively carry out plans and achieve goals;

Empathy – immersing ourselves fully in the thoughts of others, thinking what they think, feeling what they feel, and understanding the world from a different perspective; Relationship Management – involving active listening, effective communication, decision-making, dispute resolution, and coping mechanisms; Effective communication-incorporating training methods for interpreting nonverbal communication signals such as body language and facial expressions, better ways of expressing one's emotions, and appropriate communication methods in various situations.<sup>[6]</sup> These five elements of EI are applied in different areas of life where individuals need effective communication with self and others, and knowing when, to whom and how to express emotions. EI is the aptitude to manage emotions intelligently therefore, it is an important demand in health care practices, especially within the nursing field.<sup>[7]</sup>

## 2. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF NURSING

In nursing, EI is defined as a nurse's constructive ability to use self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation that facilitates and hallmarks the essence of proficient caring and nursing. The nurse's ability to establish rapport with patients, manage their own emotions and empathize with patients is essential for providing quality care.<sup>[3]</sup> In order to deliver effective nursing interventions, meet the caring needs of patients, and deal with different clinical issues and job stressors, modern health care systems need professional nurses who are emotionally intelligent.<sup>[8]</sup>

When nurses are caring for their patients, they often show their frustration, provocation, and impatience. Because of their occupation and working circumstances, nurses are bound to encounter these situations. Most of the time nurses do not know how to react and cope with these situations and may experience burnout.<sup>[9]</sup> Research suggests that burnout levels are higher among younger nurses with less work experience, and among those who spend more time caring for patients.<sup>[10,11]</sup> Emotional intelligence can assist nurses in managing their own and their patients' emotions, showing genuine emotional responses, becoming empathetic and communicating feelings without causing tension, as well as controlling instinctive emotions like disgust, disappointment, and irritation. By trying to view the situation from patients' perspectives and empathizing with their emotions, nurses can manage many clinical situations.<sup>[12]</sup> When patients are cared for by a nurse who demonstrates EI skills, they have the impression that the nurse cares for their well-being, which is the core of nursing and caring.<sup>[13,14]</sup>

Empathy is "an individual's ability to understand and share the feelings of others."<sup>[15]</sup> It consists of two dimensions, Affective Empathy, which involves an emotional response and Cognitive Empathy, which consists of a rational understanding of the emotions.<sup>[16,17]</sup> In the field of healthcare, empathy is considered an essential quality for professionals in relating to patients.<sup>[18]</sup> In the nursing profession, emotional attachment is frowned upon and furiously prohibited. Due to the fine line between emotional attachment and empathy, it can be difficult for some nurses to maintain empathy without being emotionally attached to their patients. If he or she has significant skills and a clear understanding of emotional intelligence it allows the nurse to work through their own feelings, preventing them from being emotionally invested in their patients. Nurses are able to control their emotions better, and allow them to exhibit empathy towards others without crossing the line.<sup>[19]</sup> Nurses who possess a sufficient level of emotional intelligence are well-positioned to provide practices that improve client satisfaction. They tend to understand interpersonal messages better, have better listening skills, have strong self-awareness, are more likely to be more empathetic and compatible, and show more insight than their peers who don't have these skills. Also, they are more skilled at managing their own emotions.<sup>[20-22]</sup> Increasing cognitive empathy, and diminishing the affective component, generates benefits in the care, dedication and effectiveness of healthcare workers.<sup>[23,24]</sup>

Emotional intelligence plays a critical role in making effective choices in the workplace on a daily basis. The ability to deliver safe and proper care relies on making accurate decision. Strong emotions help nurses to make effective decisions. A decision maker's emotional processing ability depends on previous experience, current emotional capital or capacity and the emotional investment an individual is willing to make in the decision's outcome.<sup>[26]</sup> Decision making is required by a nurse manager when choosing and applying a course of action from among substitutes with the aim of coping with a selected situation or problem. Decision making is a vital ability for the practice of nursing that allows nurses in taking important decisions and communicating it to other members in the organization.<sup>[26,27,28]</sup>

Nursing students are often placed in unfamiliar emotionally charged social situations. Emotional intelligence is a crucial component of nursing practise. Through emotional intelligence, nurses learn how to deal with their feelings, as well as provide emotional support to patients and their families in multi-dimensional clinical environments.<sup>[29]</sup> Emotions are essential to creating and maintaining a caring environment in nursing education.<sup>[3]</sup> Several research studies conducted on nursing students showed that their emotional intelligence was low.<sup>[1,30,31]</sup> Many researches that were conducted suggest that training of emotional intelligence in nursing students is necessary because of growing complexity of the health care environment and increasing expectations of clients in today's competitive healthcare.<sup>[1,32,33]</sup> In order to adequately prepare

professional graduate nurses, nursing students should have the ability to understand the views and needs of a wide variety of people, remain sensitive and empathetic to patient concerns, be able to keep personal emotional reactions in context, manage stress, and promote social responsibility. All these concepts are encompassed within the framework of emotional intelligence.<sup>[8,34]</sup> Nursing students are required to manage numerous clinical situations, adapt to the different teaching styles and expectations of instructors, work independently toward objectives, and manage conflicts. Furthermore, certain aspects of academic practise, such as taking tests and performing nursing practises in health care environments, can be extremely stressful. These situations require high levels of emotional management.<sup>[12,34]</sup>

The links between EI and health and well-being are gaining popularity. EI has been linked to coping, particularly rational/problem focused coping.<sup>[35,36]</sup> Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioural and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful events.<sup>[36]</sup> These processes are thought to be important psychological resources for adaptive intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional functioning.<sup>[37]</sup> Research suggests that increased feelings of control and emotional competence resulted in lower levels of perceived stress & clinical practice stress, assisted nursing students to adopt active and effective coping strategies when dealing with stress.<sup>[35,36,38-41]</sup>

Emotional intelligence has manifested its contribution to self-esteem directly.<sup>[42,43]</sup> Positive emotional intelligence is considered a strong predictor of better psychological adjustment and high self-esteem, whereas negative or low emotional intelligence is significantly related to depression, harmful and distressing behaviour.<sup>[44,45]</sup> Nursing is a very important career which requires very good mental health. The mental health status of the nursing students will exert a direct influence on their study and daily life, even the quality of their future nursing work and the stability of the nursing team. In order to improve the mental health of nursing students it is necessary that their self-esteem be developed.<sup>[46]</sup>

### **3. NURSING IMPLICATIONS**

Emotional intelligence, even though an emerging concept, has given a new momentum to its relation to better performance both personal and professional.<sup>[47]</sup> Nursing graduates must not only be competent in technical and critical thinking skills, but also be equipped to manage “soft” people skills “Soft” people skills have been identified as emotional intelligence (EI) skills.<sup>[48]</sup> The educational curriculum for nursing out shows the cognitive and technical aspect needed to prepare a fully-fledged nurse, but there exists lacunae on an organized development of the domain of emotional intelligence.<sup>[47]</sup> Regardless of the evidence that EI has a positive impact in Nursing education, EI skills are rarely promoted in nursing curricula.<sup>[29]</sup> Emotional intelligence skills can be taught and learned to deal with life stressors.<sup>[49]</sup> A positive and non-judgmental learning environment is vital for students to effectively learn EI concepts. Emotional intelligence of students can be enhanced through workshops, online coaching, soft skill training programmes, reflective learning experiences, supportive supervision and mentorship, modelling, focus on developing self and dialogic relationships, developing empathy, a commitment to emotional competency, opportunities for working creatively with the arts and humanities; self-inquiry, narrative, forum theatre, reflective discussion and writing, practising listening skills, both in the classroom and in practice; the use of video for observation and feedback, the arts, and effective listening skills, various exercises and emotional intelligence skill training.<sup>[50,51]</sup> There is a great need for inculcating such educational strategies in to nursing education, in order to enhance EI in health care environment.

### **4. SUMMARY**

Emotional intelligence has a great influence on nursing students as well as the nurses in both their personal and professional lives. There is little or no importance given to the development of EI during the professional training given to the nursing students. A mixture of knowledge, skill and emotional training would create nurses who would be looked upon with great reverence and will be very useful to the society which is in a dread need of such emotionally competent nurses. As Nurse Educators, we have a responsibility to students, to potential employees, and to the public to prepare nurses for the social and emotional demands of their roles so they are better able to deal with others confidently, competently, and safely.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

Not applicable

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