

# Emotional intelligence and the healthcare staff: Maximizing performance and patient satisfaction

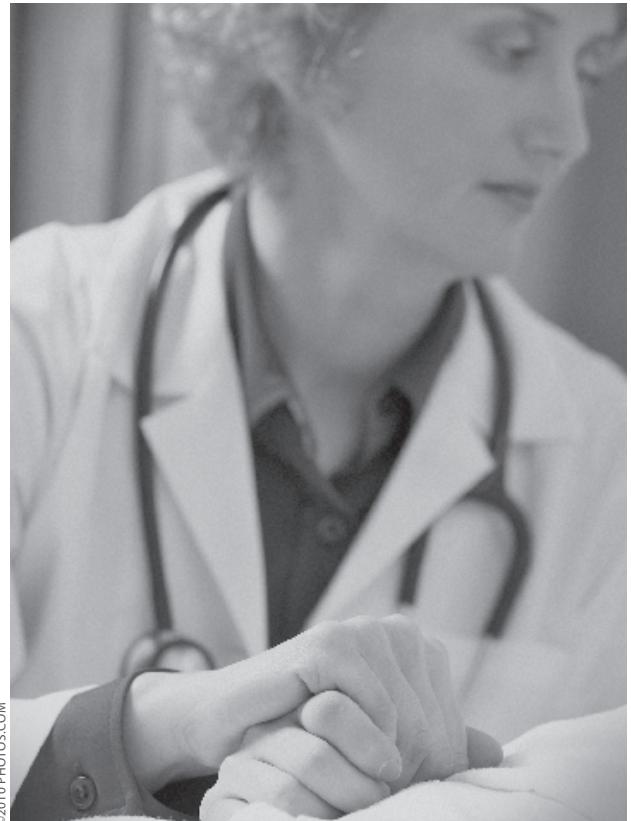
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**T**he current system of healthcare in the United States, in which patients typically pay more of their healthcare expenses than they had previously, has resulted in patients who are more discerning consumers. In addition, the Internet provides patients with abundant, readily available healthcare information, creating patients who are also better educated about their health concerns. Patients today often expect that not only will their diagnosis and treatment be efficient and effective, but their care will be delivered in a personalized and compassionate manner. Results of a recent Press Ganey survey of more than 2.4 million patients receiving medical care demonstrates that patients place a high priority on the degree to which a medical staff meets their emotional needs.<sup>1</sup> (Other priorities identified in the survey are minimal waiting times and effective communication with their healthcare providers.)

## Staffing to manage patient needs

Healthcare providers who seek to remain competitive may wish to consider examining the quality of their patient care from both a medical and an emotional perspective. Thus, although a staff member's intellect, clinical experience, and education are valuable attributes, it is often the so-called soft skills, such as emotional intelligence (EI), that a provider may call upon to manage common challenges, such as expressions of emotional strain by patients undergoing, for example, fertility treatment. Poorly managed, these expressions may lead to provider-patient conflict, poor team interaction, staff burnout, and other issues that can influence staff performance.

In recent years, non-healthcare businesses and healthcare organizations alike have engaged in EI training for staff members. Those organizations that focus on improving both supervisor and employee EI report increased productivity, an improved bottom line, and reduced employee turnover.<sup>2</sup> Many healthcare organizations such as SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York, and



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Complementing your and your staff's clinical abilities are the so-called soft skills, such as emotional intelligence (EI), that help providers manage common challenges of women's healthcare, and ensure an overall positive healthcare experience for patients.

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Methodist Hospital in Dallas, Texas, provide EI training for their employees. However, to date there has been little research to evaluate anecdotal reports of increased efficiency and higher patient and employee satisfaction. A recent *Journal of the American Medical Association* article supports training in EI during residency and in other medical training programs.<sup>3</sup>

**What is EI?**

An analysis of predictors of advancement and success among employees commencing work in the same environment at the same time found that traditional measures of success, such as IQ and vocational training, failed to predict success.<sup>4</sup> Further research and investigation led to the awareness that a key differentiator appears to be a person’s ability to navigate not only the technical aspects of the workplace, but also the emotional aspects. As Dan Goleman, a leader in the study of EI, and others strive to more precisely define the concept and to develop valid tools of measurement, the concept of EI, and its role in an organization’s success, has gained a foothold in many workplace settings.

EI (also known as EQ), is described by Goleman as “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.”<sup>4</sup>The 5 elements of EI are:

- **Self-awareness** – ability to recognize one’s own emotions and abilities
- **Self-regulation** – ability to control impulses and emotions
- **Motivation** – ability to manage emotions to attain goals
- **Empathy** – awareness of feelings and needs of others
- **Social skills** – interpersonal communication, teamwork, conflict management.

Each of these elements consists of competencies that are listed in the **TABLE**.

**EI in the healthcare setting**

EI in the workplace is defined as the ability to understand and manage one’s emotions and to express them appropriately and in a manner that facilitates people successfully working together toward common goals. Consider that a typical manager spends as much

TABLE	
Framework for emotional competence	
<b>Personal competence</b>	
Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate self-assessment</li> <li>• Emotional awareness</li> <li>• Self-confidence</li> </ul>
Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptability</li> <li>• Conscientiousness</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Self-control</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> </ul>
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement drive</li> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Initiative</li> <li>• Optimism</li> </ul>
<b>Social competence</b>	
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leveraging diversity</li> <li>• Political awareness</li> <li>• Service orientation</li> <li>• Understanding others</li> </ul>
Social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building bonds</li> <li>• Change catalyst</li> <li>• Collaboration and cooperation</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Influence</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Team capabilities</li> </ul>
Adapted from Goleman D. Working with Emotional Intelligence. New York, NY: Bantam; 2000.	

as 40% of his or her time managing conflict among employees, and the value of EI skills is apparent, particularly in a healthcare environment.<sup>5,6</sup> Hiring and training a staff with high EI is, therefore conducive to optimizing productivity, teamwork, and overall employee satisfaction. Although personality conflicts are likely to occur in a stressful work environment, self-regulated employees have the ability to act appropriately and remain composed under trying circumstances.

The typical healthcare environment is dynamic and fluid, and requires that employees adapt easily to change. Indeed, adaptability and innovativeness are 2 core

**KEY POINT**

Key to success in the workplace is the ability to navigate its emotional landscape.

## Key concepts in EI training: A closer look

Empathy, self-awareness (and self-management), and social awareness are 3 key areas of emotional intelligence (EI) training.

**Empathy.** Among the first concepts introduced during EI training of healthcare staff is empathy, in which the student is given tools to help understand what a patient is feeling about a situation. Simple recognition and validation of the patient's emotional state can make a lasting impression on a patient. The healthcare worker who demonstrates empathy is likely better able to establish a trusting relationship with patients, which may result in more productive interactions. Empathetic communication may enhance the therapeutic effectiveness of the clinician-patient relationship. Additionally, incorporating empathy into communication allows for a smoother exchange of medical information and demonstrates the provider's respect for the feelings and needs of the patient.

**Self-awareness, self-management.** A patient who experiences anxiety, fear, and confusion may bring anger and resentment to the healthcare setting. It is not uncommon for patients to project these negative feelings onto the nurse or other healthcare provider. Providers who are trained in self-awareness and self-management are better able to manage and defuse these often tense situations and prevent the escalation of conflict.

**Social awareness.** A clinician's social awareness can influence his or her relationship with a patient. For example, a clinician who is capable of noticing a patient's nonverbal and verbal cues will perceive when a patient needs more clarification, or simple comfort. The use of interpersonal communication skills such as active listening, reflective responding, and validating emotions can have a lasting impression on a vulnerable patient, and may improve patient and physician collaboration, thereby improving overall care.

### KEY POINT

EI training may help staff better adapt to change.

competencies of EI. By learning self-awareness skills, workers can become more cognizant of emotional response to change, and thus, may be less resistant to it. Ideally, a flexible team can be trained to react positively to changes in personnel, management, and even physical office space.

Additionally, the healthcare setting can be emotionally charged and stressful for both patients and providers. Patient anxiety may arise from physical, emotional, and, perhaps, financial challenges, while staff members may feel overworked, under-supported, or insufficiently equipped to handle daily challenges. Basic EI training may allow staff members to more easily and effectively adapt to change and also to meet patient needs.

### Achieving a high-EI team

Creating a high-EI team involves multiple, discrete steps. Important among these at the outset is generating excitement, buy-in, and participation in training among organization leadership. Once widespread acceptance of the initiative is achieved, each employee undergoes an EI assessment, typically through the use of tools that are available online or in print. Two commonly used

assessment tools are the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (Bar-On EQ-I) and the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). After employees have been assessed and their strengths and weaknesses analyzed, a comprehensive training plan may be initiated, usually conducted by a qualified training company (See, "Key concepts in EI training: A closer look"). Depending on the size of the organization, training may involve a series of one-on-one coaching sessions, or a series of half- or full-day training programs with 10 to 12 participants at a time.

Effective EI training involves skill development that includes tools and techniques to assist employees' understanding of their own emotional landscape as well as methods for identifying and managing the emotions of others. Identified weaknesses can yield longer-term goals for improvement, which may be incorporated into the employee performance review process.

Healthcare providers are typically accustomed to receiving lectures on medical and scientific topics, and may resist training in the soft skills, such as how to better get along with coworkers and improve their relationships with patients. A provider who lacks these



### Interviewing for emotional intelligence

- What gives you the greatest sense of achievement at work? Why?
- All jobs have frustration; please describe some examples of frustrations in your job.
- What standards have you set for yourself in your current position? How well do you meet these standards?
- Can you describe 3 situations in which you did not succeed and why?
- Please describe an unexpected problem that you were confronted with and how you managed the problem.
- Have you had to deal with a difficult person?
- Give me a specific example of your use of good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Describe a situation in any job you held in which you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.

skills may not perceive this to be the case; employees who score the lowest on EI testing typically resist EI training. In such instances, individual coaching and working through areas of resistance may prove beneficial.

Once management and staff receive and integrate training and establish a healthcare environment with high EI, an important step in maintaining that high EI is to integrate behavioral interviewing techniques in the hiring process. An employer hiring healthcare personnel typically focuses on a candidate's technical training and clinical experience, and the introduction of effective interviewing techniques can expand the assessment to include an analysis of a candidate's communication skills, flexibility, adaptability, stress management, and potential for teamwork (see, "Interviewing for emotional intelligence"). Many employers have added a formal EI assessment to the interview process, possibly using one of tools mentioned above. Although the competencies involved in EI can be improved through structured training, a baseline measurement of the candidate's EI can provide helpful data in the hiring decision.

### Summary

EI assessment and training can directly affect patient care. Practices that train staff in EI may experience an improved workplace environment, better patient retention, and better outcomes. Understanding one's emotions will allow healthcare workers to better self-assess and self-regulate, and thus better work together in a medical setting. <sup>n</sup>

### KEY POINT

Those who score low on initial EI testing typically resist training.

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