

Three-Minute Reflections

*Step back from life and reflect on how
the inner you shapes your behavior*



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Empathy – A Real Life Example

In my last Three-Minute Reflection I made the case that physician empathy is an important factor associated with clinical competence and patient outcomes. I wrote about the results of a study published in the March 2011 issue of *Academic Medicine*. What I didn't do however, was describe how, in the time-crunched reality of hospital or office practice, a physician can actually engage in an empathic exchange with a patient. Let me tell you a true story – I know it's true because I was in the room, in our hospital, when this physician-patient interaction took place.

The entire exchange took no more than 5-7 minutes and the empathic interaction occurred in less than a minute! What made it important was how absolutely present and engaged this physician was for his patient. His empathic attending was all the proof she needed to know that she was in good hands. You could almost watch her anxiety dissipate and her spirits rise.

In our hurry-hurry world we all hunger to be known and recognized as a person not just as a patient or family member, or nurse, or tech, or secretary, or housekeeper, or administrator. Physicians also hunger to be known and acknowledged. The empathy you demonstrate to your physician colleagues is just as important as the empathy you demonstrate to your patients. And while we are on the topic...empathy expressed at home to your significant other and children is powerful stuff!

Dr. Empathy entered the hospital room, greeted the patient, and asked how she was feeling. The patient, a 70-year-old woman, was two days post-op; she reported that she was feeling good. Dr. Empathy lifted her gown, examined the surgery site and quickly asked the relevant questions. His assessment complete, he said; "You are doing great – healing just fine." She smiled and said; "Yes I am!" That could have completed the interaction but because he was listening to the emotional message woven into her response, he was able to take the interaction one step further. He looked up, made eye contact with the patient, smiled, and said; "You're feeling proud of yourself aren't you." She beamed! His empathic comment was exactly right – she was feeling really good about herself and the progress she was making. It was a wonderful moment of healing in which a physician demonstrated accurate empathy and in so doing expressed the very essence of the mission of this hospital.

How to build your empathy...

- *Listen for the emotional message that is imbedded in what people are saying.*
- *Practice identifying the emotions of others – preferably with someone who will tell you whether you got it right.*
- *Build your emotional vocabulary. (I will be happy to send you a list of feeling words)*
- *Engage a "Coach" to help you build your empathy skills.*

Thanks for reflecting.