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Emotional Intelligence as the Core of Successful Individual and Professional Performance of Healthcare Professionals

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ABSTRACT: Emotional Intelligence refers to a different way of being smart. EI is a key to high performance, particularly for outstanding leadership. It's not your IQ, but rather it's how you manage yourself and your relationships with others.

—Daniel Goleman, *Crucial Competence: Building Emotional and Social Leadership*

Emotions determine our individual and professional performance and our relationships on different levels. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has recently turned from a new concept into the core of successful professional realization. The purpose of this review is to evaluate the role of emotional intelligence for healthcare professionals' success either on individual or on professional level. Literature review was conducted as the main research method in order to evaluate the role of EI in the field of healthcare and to answer the research questions. The conducted research provided a link between the basic competences in the field of healthcare and high levels of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the path to establishing and maintaining positive social and professional relationships in a caring environment. Based on the review of 27 articles, we conclude that EI is positively and significantly associated with personal and professional performance. When emotion and cognition are intertwined, this leads to adaptive perception and intelligent use of both resulting in better personal, social and professional functioning.

KEYWORDS: Healthcare professionals, Emotional intelligence, Performance, Success

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I. INTRODUCTION

Emotions determine our individual and professional performance and our relationships on different levels. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been in the spotlight of psychologists and behavioral scientists since 1990. Daniel Goleman was the person who popularized the theory and focused the attention of the society on utilizing these soft skills. Theorists soon related the importance of EI to the healthcare sector. Emotional Intelligence has turned from a new concept into the core of successful professional realization. Healthcare professionals graduate with a variety of skills except for the theoretical and practical knowledge. EI skills in various areas of clinical practice have the power to influence the quality of care as well as the wellbeing of both practitioners and patients.

Healthcare education and training in Bulgaria have undergone dramatic changes over the years and they have gone beyond the limitations of the past. There was a shift from the traditional apprenticeship approach to an innovative modern educational model with a variety of options to specialize in and develop an academic career. The role of healthcare professionals has evolved since the time of Florence Nightingale – the founder of modern nursing. Nowadays, the training course syllabi in the field of healthcare must fulfill the requirements set by the accrediting authorities. Each country has professional associations that regulate the practice of healthcare professionals in order to maintain high quality care and standards in training, education, and professional conduct. In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Association of Healthcare Professionals (BAHP) supports the guild of healthcare professionals and maintains high quality standards through lifelong learning courses.

Not surprisingly, bearing in mind the nature of the field of caring, healthcare educators are becoming more interested in the concept of emotional intelligence and its impact on the future professional realization. In Finland, some universities have already started to change the admission procedure for the nursing degree

programs and their criteria include an emotional intelligence test in addition to the other components of entrance exams (Haavisto et al., 2019). According to Haavisto et al. (2019), this test could determine the applicant's ability to manage his/her feelings and those of others when encountering different situations at the workplace. This test could determine the compatibility of applicants and it could serve as an indicator for success in their studies. It also focuses on the three most important areas of study and work – the ability to learn, security in the chosen career and emotional intelligence (Haavisto et al., 2019). A recent study revealed that the lack of ability to control emotions is manifested during the course of education. According to Hansen&Viriden (2022) graduate students in health professional programs report high scores of burnout or emotional exhaustion, which means that a student in this position cannot perform well either in an academic or clinical setting along with maintaining good personal health.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this review is to evaluate the role of emotional intelligence for healthcare professionals' success either on individual or on professional level. Moreover, it seeks to understand the degree to which personal and professional performance depend on emotional intelligence. This paper further explores the importance of emotional intelligence within the healthcare sector. Finally, it is hoped that this paper will raise educationalists' awareness of the need for assessment of EI competencies throughout the course of study at university. The author attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Does emotional intelligence influence the personal and professional performance of healthcare professionals?
2. What are the most important aspects of emotional intelligence in the field of healthcare?
3. How significant is emotional intelligence in the delivery of care?

METHODS

Literature review was conducted as the main research method in order to evaluate the role of EI in the field of healthcare and to answer the research questions. A total of 20 articles in English were reviewed according to their relevance to the topic during the primary search. The data we collected were based on initial searches in several databases, including Medline, PubMed, PubMed Central and PsycINFO, using the terms "emotional intelligence" and "healthcare professionals". We went on reviewing the reference list of each article according to its relevance and the second stage added 7 more articles. Information from a variety of sources related to the topic of investigation was analyzed.

II. BACKGROUND

Intellectual intelligence is a broad concept that experts regard as mental abilities or it is more or less the ability to gain knowledge, process information and solve problems, while emotional intelligence is the ability to reflect emotions through your own prism. Mental intelligence, including logical-mathematical intelligence, despite the effort put into it, can be leveled up to a certain degree based on personal capacity. On the contrary, emotional intelligence can be developed over time without age limitations provided that endeavor is made to reach emotional balance within yourself or with others. These two types of intelligence complement each other for a fulfilled life. Intellectual intelligence cannot function isolated; on the contrary, it should be in constant interaction with emotional intelligence to be successful either on individual or professional level. While cognitive intelligence is based in the neo-cortex region of the brain, emotional intelligence is based in the sub-cortex region and involved both the parts of the brain working together (Goleman, 1998). Thereupon, emotional intelligence and cognitive intelligence differ in origin and mechanism but complement each other.

Understanding, regulating and managing emotions can be a major component of effectively negotiating working life and other aspects of personal life in general (Faguy, 2012). The healthcare setting is unique and diverse which requires people with both intellect and EI. The specifics of the profession demand highly motivated and dedicated people, able to gauge the intrinsic emotional world of both colleagues and patients. At that point, the excellent academic preparation gives way to social skills and ultimately, the indispensable emotional intelligence. According to Goleman (2006), emotional intelligence is a person's capacity to manage their feelings in order to express them in an appropriate and accurate way. Furthermore, Goleman (2006) claims that emotional intelligence is the most important predictor of success at the workplace; specifically, he states that emotional intelligence accounts for 67% of the abilities considered necessary for superior performance in leaders, and is 200% more important than high IQ. He goes on to name five dimensions of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.



Fig. 1. Goleman's five categories of EI

Most of the components that make up EI are closely related with the self and self-knowledge.

- ❖ A self-aware medical professional is familiar with their own positives and negatives and understands what influence their words and behaviors have on other people. Most of the work in the healthcare settings involves communication, which is crucial for the delivery of care and teamwork. Such people respond to constructive criticism and do not feel offended. On the contrary, they learn from it. According to Younas (2020), “self-awareness can increase nurses' confidence in managing challenging situations and providing culturally competent care to patients from various cultural and religious orientations”. Such competences can help to differentiate ethical from unethical behaviors within the healthcare sector.
- ❖ A self-regulated person knows how to control their emotions especially when working under stress. Many critical situations in the process of care provision demand quick decisions due to excessive workload or shortage of healthcare workers. Emotional forecasting and channeling emotions are the tools to overcome negative feelings such as frustration, anxiety, sorrow or stress, which are common in healthcare settings. As Freshman & Rubino (2002) pointed out “EI skills of self-awareness, reflection, intuition, and compassion for yourself and others will be of great service toward using energy stirred up by emotional events in productive ways.”
- ❖ A self-motivated person strives for success driven mostly by intrinsic factors. A self-motivated healthcare professional is propelled to act for the wellbeing of both patients and colleagues, for the sake of personal and professional satisfaction and enjoyment. The heavy duties due to the high turnover of healthcare staff or working unsocial hours cannot be compensated by extrinsic factors such as social or material rewards. A recent study by Kitsios & Kamariotou (2021) pointed out that the key motivators within the health units are the relationships with their colleagues and the level of achievement, while the level of rewards and job characteristics play a secondary role.
- ❖ Empathy can be expressed both verbally and non-verbally. Better health outcomes have been achieved through healthcare professionals' empathetic behaviors. Empathy is the ability to understand patient's fears, anxiety or pain. It is the tool that facilitates the process of healing, builds patient trust and bridges the gap between care providers and care receivers. Moudatsou et al. (2020) revealed that empathy-based relationships between health professionals and their health care users result in a therapeutic plan and a subsequent tailor-made intervention, leading to enhanced patient satisfaction from the therapeutic process.
- ❖ Social skills are the skills we use to communicate either verbally or nonverbally. They are the core of building professional or personal relationships and interacting with each other. Historically, the emphasis has always been on developing clinical skills in healthcare. They are easily acquired through education and it is not difficult to identify them. What patients and their families notice are social skills such as work ethic, positive attitude, active listening and compassion, among others.

All these attributes facilitate the emotional wellbeing of both care providers and care receivers and they enhance clinical practice to benefit patients, their families and colleagues. Ultimately, leading to positive health outcomes. Sensitivity to mood and emotions is an integral part of care and should not be taken in isolation from how we think and act as professionals (Akerjordet, 2007).

On the contrary, the shortage of healthcare professionals is a global issue and the demand for them will increase in the near future. The provision of care and the access to health services influenced by the shortage of such personnel, ageing and burnout would not only have a negative impact on our individual health but could have social and economic consequences. The World Health Organization estimates a projected shortfall of 15 million health workers by 2030, mostly in low- and lower-middle income countries (WHO, 2022). According to Shortell and Selberg (2002), “the health care system is fundamentally flawed in its design ... it relies on outmoded methods of work, the system sets up its workforce to fail ... working harder will not improve quality; working differently ... will”. Working in the healthcare sector is emotionally charged and demanding at the same time. The balance between the emotional drain and the professional and personal satisfaction is the key to overcome the emergent state of affairs in healthcare. Nowadays, maintaining the quality of care is impossible with sheer intelligence and excellent clinical skills.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis of the research results outlined four major domains. The first major domain was physical health. A vast amount of research pointed out that the physiological functioning of the body is dependent on the emotional state. Positive affect has been found to have a strong effect on older adults' perceptions of their health and has been linked to fewer symptoms, less pain, and better health (Cohen & Pressman, 2006). Negative affective states have been associated with increased anxiety and depression in patient populations (Watson & Clark, 1988) and have been identified as a prospective risk factor for hypertension (Jonas & Lando, 2000). The second major domain reveals the relationship between EI and mental health. Higher EI has been found to be linked with low to lower psychological distress (Austin et al., 2005), moderately related to lower depression (Goldenberg et al., 2006) and strongly to lower anxiety (Mikolajczak et al., 2007), consequently leading to resistance to mental health problems. As far as social health is concerned as the third major domain, higher emotional intelligence is linked with aspects of better psychosocial functioning resulting in better social relationships. Being in harmony with your emotions can fulfil social purposes such as being in tune with yourself and the other people around you. Studies examining the link between EI and a range of interpersonal relations found that participants with higher EQ scores had higher scores for empathic perspective taking, self-monitoring and social skills, cooperation with partners, relationship satisfaction, and more affectionate relationships (Schutte et al., 2001).

The fourth main domain focuses on leadership in the healthcare sector. The multitude of roles in the world of healthcare involves a variety of qualities. The provision of care is the main responsibility of healthcare professionals along with the diverse occupations such as educationalists, researchers, mentors, etc. Professional growth is possible through a synergetic relationship between the mentee and the mentor. Effective mentorship exhibits a variety of skills closely related to EI, apart from knowledge of healthcare principles. The key skills that can help novice healthcare professionals to advance in their career are excellent communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and empathy. On behalf of the mentor, patience and leadership skills are crucial for encouraging successful practitioners in the chosen area. Providing guidance and support would be impossible without balanced leadership styles. In their review of leadership in health care, West et al. (2015) noted that leadership styles contribute to team cohesion, lower stress, and higher empowerment and self-efficacy (Gilmartin, M.J. and D'Aunno, T.A., 2007, as cited in West et al., 2015). The role models offered by emotionally intelligent leaders can be beneficial and they can easily turn in the steps to excel in the profession.

The research questions are in line with the ideas and thoughts generated in the Results section.

Question 1: Does emotional intelligence influence the personal and professional performance of healthcare professionals?

The conducted research provided a link between the basic competences in the field of healthcare and high levels of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the path to establishing and maintaining positive social and professional relationships in a caring environment. Once the emotion exchange process becomes an automatic mechanism based on age, experience and the degree of emotionally charged interaction, this will allow healthcare professionals to keep their emotions under control in critical situations. Kluemper et al. (2011) stated that since EI can create and enhance trustworthiness between healthcare professionals and patients, it inevitably turns into a building block of the emotional fabric of clinical and medical practice. Establishing a good and trustworthy relationship with their patients in order to deliver the best possible care is one of the primary duties of doctors and nurses (Bailey et al., 2011). Such relationships can be extremely delicate in emotionally charged situations. Emotions such as anxiety, anger, helplessness and frustration need to be appropriately managed since the effort of altering emotional *status* would allow healthcare professionals to sustain an outward appearance in line with what they think is the most appropriate behavior to show (Martin et al., 2015; Szczygiel and Mikolajczak, 2018 as cited in Carminati, 2021). Results from this study indicate that high levels of emotional intelligence among healthcare professionals are directly proportional to their excellent professional and individual performance. Mayer et al. (1999) found out that there is close relationship between

ability-based EI and gender, age, and experience. The ability to sense and manage emotions is a complex process that results in resilient and healthy personal and professional relationships. Knowing the impact of EI skill set on the personal and professional performance of healthcare professionals can help to achieve personal or career goals.

Question 2: What are the most important aspects of emotional intelligence in the field of healthcare?

Researchers strongly believe that EI is one of the things that make difference between the most successful healthcare professionals and the rest. Soft skills such as adaptability to cope with occupational stress, job satisfaction, empathy and leadership skills are all associated with high emotional intelligence and contribute to better patient care. They are all predictors of success within the healthcare sector and are recognized as some of the most important aspects of EI.

McQueen (2004) stated that the quality of care might be enhanced when nurses can engage with patients, detect and act on cues, anticipate needs and wishes, and respond to convey physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of care. Therefore, establishing trustful relationships with patients and other healthcare professionals, based on interaction, is a complex process that can be emotionally draining if you are not able to manage your emotions. Moderation is the key to the highest levels of EI.

Question 3: How significant is emotional intelligence in the delivery of care?

The world of care has a complex structure and EI as a concept is multifaceted and dependent on the specific healthcare environment. Healthcare professionals are not solely responsible for the delivery of care. They are also accountable for health promotion and health education with their different aspects. Furthermore, nurses, for example, are professionals who are in close and constant contact with the patients they take care of. Understanding and being sensitive to their needs and emotions with a positive attitude is a must-have for a therapeutic relationship, patient-centered care and ultimately effective treatment. Thus, EI is beneficial for professionals, patients and has a direct impact on healthcare institutions. The trichotomy team cohesiveness-team performance-teamwork quality is completely dependent on individual professional performance. EI is no more a background skill added to professional performance. It is the tool that places healthcare professionals a step ahead when they have to deal with some challenging diagnosis or treatment in their daily routine. Otherwise, it would be impossible to cope with the complexity of modern healthcare.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the review of 27 articles, we conclude that EI is positively and significantly associated with personal and professional performance. When emotion and cognition are intertwined, this leads to adaptive perception and intelligent use of both resulting in better personal, social and professional functioning. In conclusion, EI can boost the morale of healthcare professionals and promote good interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, which results in better job performance, personal satisfaction, good team interaction and a positive working atmosphere within the healthcare sector. All these factors facilitate achieving the ultimate goal, which is developing and empowering practitioners who can shape the future of healthcare.

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