

Empathy Star



Of course the golden quality and skill of empathy is threaded through every one of the Ward Stars. Mental health inpatient care is rooted in empathy – the ability to share in another’s emotions. The core nursing qualities of compassion, caring, comforting, and kindness are rooted in one’s capacity for empathy.

The Empathy Star reflects the times when HCAs touch patients with their empathy through kind words, active listening, emotional intelligence, thoughtful gestures and actions, appreciative body language, and gentle honesty. Empathy is the personal quality, and professional skill that is most cherished by patients. For a lot of patients spending time with someone who is empathic is a turning point in their recovery or even their lives, as one service users describes: “The staff didn’t judge me so for the first time in my life I could relax and not feel under pressure to meet everyone’s expectations.”

Imagine this...

“At any given moment I try to become aware of the combination of strong feelings and emotions I’m experiencing: anxiety, suspiciousness, stress etc. Then I imagine these being intensified by 100% and it gives me an idea of how the patients I care for must be feeling” - HCA

HCAs’ empathy helps patients feel grounded in the present and have hope for the future. A generous helping of empathy and presence (focusing on and totally being with the other person) is crucial for establishing ‘relational depth’ with patients. Really meeting and connecting with people who use the ward, creating quality relationships, is what Ward Stars and indeed inpatient care is all about. In their ground-breaking book ‘Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy’, Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper admit that it’s difficult to capture this magical quality in words but attempt to describe it as: ‘...those moments of connection and intimacy with a client when each person’s words seem to flow from the other’s and all self-consciousness is lost...’ They go onto to offer a working definition of relational depth: ‘A state of profound contact and engagement between two people, in which each person is fully real with the Other, and able to understand and value the Other’s experiences at a high level.’ Feeling “at home” with a patient during an interaction feels good for both parties.

Imagine this...

“Wards can be very busy and noisy places. But there are times when you’re listening to a patient and they become your only focus while you’re with them. You totally forget about all the activity around you; the sounds and all of that. It’s a kind of empathic tunnel-vision and they are the times when I most enjoy my job. They are the times when I think patients are most helped” - HCA

Professor Paul Gilbert (author of the brilliant book *Compassionate Mind*) says that ‘Self-empathy is the ability to stand back from and understand our own thoughts and feelings.’ This also succinctly defines talking therapy, but HCAs don’t need to be equipped with a full-on psychotherapeutic qualification to be mindful of what’s going on for patients and therefore help them be more mindful as a consequence.

Creating a ‘knowing me, knowing you’ board with patient and staff profiles and pictures; facilitating community meetings in which everyone has a chance to be heard and listened to; helping patients make contact with pets and animals... there are countless examples of how HCAs demonstrate empathy.

It’s sometimes difficult to truly comprehend what others are going through or how they’re experiencing something, or we may even totally disagree with what they are saying. The wonderful thing about empathy is that we don’t need to agree with them, fully make sense of or relate to what they are saying to empathise. What patients most value is a member of staff taking the time to be present with them, to connect with them where they are, and to be acknowledged, non-judgementally. That’s the best gift; it’s where true healing begins.

Related Wardipedia features and examples

67. Ward culture of empathy

- The displays a large poster displaying a list of emotional words which helps broadens everyone's emotional vocabulary.

68. Talking therapies

- Food and mood group.

69. Therapeutic interior design

- Simple things like, yes, scatter cushions, plants, attractive and interesting artwork have quickly and cheaply transformed the ward.

70. Comfort objects

- Staff are trained on the importance of comfort objects. All staff (including management) were asked to bring in an item or object that comforts them.

71. Housekeeping heroes

- One of the housekeeping staff contributes to the ward newsletter.

72. Complementary therapies

- In collaboration with a service user volunteer, HCAs produced a guided relaxation CD for all staff and patients to use on the wards.

73. Addiction support

- The ward facilitates patients attending such services as AA together.

74. Samaritans

- One of the HCAs has created a display on external sources of help and support. She collected a range of posters and leaflets, including some from the Samaritans.

75. Reflective practice groups

- Case formulation group is forum for qualified nurses to get support re: clients emotions and behaviour.

76. Good night

- Night staff are encouraged to do at least one day shift a month to aid team cohesion and decrease isolation.

77. Happy

- The ward has a big circus skills box!

Some of the ways patients may benefit from the Empathy Star:

- Patients feel able to approach and engage with staff
- Patients feel listened to, understood and supported
- Patients are better able to express themselves
- Patients feel warmly engaged with; not just observed
- A ward environment of kindness and compassion is nurtured
- A special effort is made to welcome and reassure visitors

Resources

- Action for Happiness has developed the *10 Keys to Happier Living*: http://www.actionforhappiness.org/media/80220/great_dream_-_10_keys_to_happier_living_download_formatted_v7.pdf
- <http://www.wardipedia.org/77-happy/>
- *TalkWell*:
http://starwards.org.uk/images/stories/user_files/marion/TalkWell_2nd_Edition/TalkWell_2nd_Edition_4.1mb.pdf
- A useful, fun and informative site on Mentalising: <http://www.mentalising.com/>
- What is empathy: <http://www.befriendingourselves.com/Self-empathy.html>
- *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* by Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper
- *Compassionate Mind* by Paul Gilbert