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## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN NURSING

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### ABSTRACT

Nurses are often exposed to work under pressure, the challenges of making extremely quick and responsible decisions, and dealing with other people's pain, suffering and losses. Of all healthcare professionals, they spend the most time with the patient, creating a special relationship based on trust. Previously, it was an intuitive process where nurses were only sometimes successful. Today, in evidence-based nursing, we are aware of how important emotional intelligence is in all aspects of nursing and nursing education. Physical fatigue is less of a problem for nurses than emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue. Therefore, effective emotional regulation is necessary to improve business satisfaction. Managing emotions is achieved by developing emotional intelligence, which has become a more ubiquitous concept in nursing in recent years. The most desirable employees in healthcare (and elsewhere) are those with developed academic intellectual abilities, but also emotional intelligence. With the help of the components of emotional intelligence, the internal mechanism of the specific nurse-patient relationship could be explained, which has proven to help both the patient in achieving favorable health care outcomes and the nurses themselves in acting and understanding the very essence of nursing. Emotional intelligence as a mental skill helps an individual in various personal, social, professional, communication and financial domains such as: time management, decision making, service delivery, responsibility, empathy, presentation skills, stress tolerance, trust and communication management. This overview paper will try to present its importance in nursing.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, nursing, empathy, communication

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## INTRODUCTION

The term emotional intelligence (EI) dates back to 1990. It means the ability to recognize one's own and other people's feelings and to use them as a starting point for decision-making (1). EI can be learned and improved and is not like classical, academic intelligence determined by genetics and biology. Everyone has the opportunity to develop it, which contributes to the interest in this concept. Today, EI mean four groups of hierarchically arranged abilities. Each previous one needs to be developed in order to develop the next one:

1. the ability to accurately observe, assess and express emotions
2. the ability to perceive and generate emotions that facilitate thinking
3. the ability to understand and analyze emotions
4. the ability to regulate emotions in order to promote emotional and intellectual development (2).

EI is not in opposition to the classic intelligence quotient, i.e. cognitive skills, but is in a dynamic relationship with them, both on a conceptual level and in everyday life. Bar-On defines EI as a set of emotional and social competencies, which help determine a person's ability to adapt in an environment characterized by interaction with oneself and others (3). It is ideal when exceptional cognitive and emotional skills are combined in one person (4). It is well known that people with high EI make fewer mistakes, can better control their emotions and can make better decisions (5). There is a global interest in EI in nursing. International research has shown that the work and

interaction of nurses with patients is affected by their EI. It is associated with kindness and care. Compared to students of other study programs, nursing students achieve better results on EI tests, and its levels increase with age and are often higher in women (6). Many healthcare systems have come under fire in recent years due to an alleged lack of compassion and care, which leads to adverse patient outcomes (7). Employers today have the option of testing EI when hiring medical personnel (8).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this work was collected by reviewing the literature of various biomedical journals searched from the beginning of November 2022 to the end of May 2023. The databases EBSCO, Scopus and PubMed were used for materials in English, and Hrčak and CROSBİ for scientific journals and articles in Croatian. The inclusion criteria were mainly related to the age of the publication. Preference is given to newer publications. The keywords used in the literature search were: emotional intelligence, nursing, empathy, communication. 64 articles from biomedical journals, doctoral theses and graduate theses were reviewed.

## RESULTS

### Emotional intelligence and professional communication

Communication skills belong to social skills and represent forms of behavior necessary for interaction with other people. Empathy, active listening and

assertiveness as complex communication skills as well as self-reliance, openness, warmth and politeness create prerequisites for improving communication, and are usually associated with EI. Patients wish for better communication with healthcare personnel, which leads to more precise detection of problems, detection of emotional discomfort and improvement of patient satisfaction with the service provided (9). Patient satisfaction is related to the nurse's ability to reflect and express warmth, emotional support, understanding, care and availability to patients (10). By communicating with empathy, nurses can reduce complications, improve treatment outcomes, and improve their professional satisfaction. Empathy and satisfaction with communication serve as mediators between EI and positive evaluation of health care (11).

A higher level of education improves EI and emotional regulation, which increases the making of correct clinical decisions in nursing students (12). It is obvious and understandable that the nursing profession requires a certain emotional investment. Although the idea of EI has only recently been discussed in the nursing literature, many health professions agree that it is valuable. Previous research suggests a link between EI and emotionally charged work, but further research is needed to fully understand this relationship. Some nurses and technicians will be more emotionally committed to their work, but it is not clear whether this is due to a higher level of EI (13).

### **Empathy, compassion fatigue and burnout**

Empathy is a key component in building a strong nurse-patient relationship

and is deeply rooted in the process of nursing care. However, little is known about the specifics of how nurses show empathy towards their patients. All nurse-patient interactions revolve around empathy, which can be considered a crucial clinical indicator of providing high-quality medical care. This compassionate connection between nurses and patients affects the improvement of clinical results, for example, empathic treatment of elderly mentally ill patients or nurse empathy can help patients reduce pain, has a beneficial effect on heart rate, helps patients share their emotions. Williams (1979) found that elderly patients who received empathy from nurses experienced a statistically significant improvement in their self-concept and that empathy can dramatically reduce anxiety, sadness, and anger in cancer patients (14). Empathy can be measured by the empathy quotient, a questionnaire created to be sensitive to empathy disorders as a component of psychopathology and is often used in other areas of psychological research (15). The results of a meta-analysis from 2018 showed that empathy is a moderately strong predictor of therapy outcome (16). The foundations of providing humane care are compassion and empathy, which requires nurses to understand and support patients as they deal with different suffering and pain, to feel and perceive from the patient's perspective and to feel and perceive from their own perspective. Their presence prevents the patient from feeling helpless and isolated. Empathy means "getting under the skin" of another person in order to see and feel things through their eyes. Through this way of communication, the nurse becomes sensitive to the thoughts, feelings, problems and needs that the patient may or

may not express openly (17). However, it is important to set a limit. If the nurse does not separate her feelings in time and identifies with the patient completely, there is a possibility of being overwhelmed and unable to provide help. Each patient arouses reactions in us and there is a wide range of emotions that can be triggered in us. These can be positive (sympathy, understanding and tenderness) or negative reactions (roughness, impatience, repulsion) (18). Due to constant exposure to patients' suffering, nurses often experience empathy fatigue and find it difficult to empathize, which can affect: physical, mental health, lead to job burnout, reduce service standards and affect both patient and staff safety (19, 20). Medical errors and loss of nursing skills are problems that often arise in the context of compassion fatigue (21).

A 2022 meta-analysis by Chen et al. shows that a psychological intervention can improve the level of empathy satisfaction of nurses, improve the symptoms of empathy fatigue, and have a certain preventive effect on its occurrence and development. It is suggested that managers take care and take measures to improve the level of mental health and the quality of nursing care provided, which would ensure the sustainable and healthy development of the nursing profession (22).

Nurses are exposed to psychosocial risks that can affect mental and physical health through stress. Prolonged stress at work can lead to burnout syndrome. An important factor in the protection against psychosocial risks is EI, which is associated with physical and psychological health, job satisfaction, increased commitment to work and reduced burnout

(23). Nursing staff are more emotionally competent, but at the same time subject to a higher level of workplace stress compared to, for example, radiology staff. There is a positive correlation between emotional competence and stress level (24). Landa and Zafra (2010) point out that the development of empathy, as one of the aspects of EI, is the central factor of many nursing theories and that EI enables nurses to develop a therapeutic relationship with patients and their families and to cope better with stress. In addition, EI is associated with a lower incidence of burnout syndrome, and greater job satisfaction and better health among nurses (25).

### Emotional intelligence and the quality of health care

Patient requirements are met with proper and safe care, empathy, appropriate communication and respect. Quality of care and nurses' EI may be significantly related. Intraprofessional and interprofessional communication of nurses is essential in the workplace. Consequently, having sufficient EI abilities can help them better understand the emotional climate in their workplaces. Those who work in a clinical setting must base important decisions on the patient's emotional state. Nursing assessment can significantly influence the patient's treatment outcomes and raise the standard of treatment (26). Nursing care pays much attention to improving the quality of health care since it can improve patient satisfaction, efficiency of care, and hospital costs (7). Often, patients' opinions have a direct impact on how to improve the quality of care (28). Additionally, outcomes that show improvement in the quality of nursing care have a significant

impact on patient satisfaction (29). Patients' satisfaction with medical care is directly, significantly and positively related to nurses' emotional intelligence (30). Overall, having excellent EI abilities can improve healthcare quality and patient satisfaction. According to previous studies, patients with an EI of up to 94% can fairly assess the quality of hospital care (31). In addition, nurses can serve as a precise "measuring tool" for the standard of hospital care (32).

From the perspective of nurses and patients, there are numerous problems with the quality of care. Askari et al. find a significant difference only in the psychosocial component, while Jamsahar et al. state that the attitudes of nurses and patients about the quality of health care are different in all psychological, physical and communication domains. In addition, there are problems with how data such as age, gender, education, and work experience can affect the investigated variables (33,34).

In order to care for patients more effectively, nurses need different communication, psychological, emotional, decision-making and empathy abilities (35,36). Although previous studies have reported a number of beneficial effects, none of them have looked at the impact of EI on the overall standard of care. All aspects of the quality of health care, including psychological, physical, and linguistic, appear to be directly influenced by EI, which also improves caregivers' abilities related to these aspects (37,38). EI has a favorable influence on the dimensions and quality of health care.

### Emotional intelligence of leaders in nursing

EI is associated with effectiveness and success in the workplace, especially in leadership positions (39,40,41). By guiding others toward common goals while fostering productive interpersonal relationships with their coworkers and team members, emotionally intelligent leaders demonstrate sensitivity to their own and others' mental health and well-being. In the context of the corona virus pandemic, nurse managers needed to demonstrate emotional intelligence in managing teams under high levels of stress, fatigue and the possibility of moral distress (42). Reduced patient mortality was associated with higher EI of nursing managers (43).

### Emotional intelligence of nursing students and their teachers

A high degree of EI is crucial for nurses because they spend the most time with patients and their families. Nursing students must be taught the value of EI in nursing throughout their education. According to a literature review, nursing students have a higher level of emotional intelligence (EI) than students of other study programs (6). In order to provide high quality health care, nursing students learn a range of skills and knowledge from daily interactions with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Although it is often shown that women have a higher level of EI, research in Slovenia in 2018 did not confirm this, but it was shown that students of higher years have a higher level of EI than students of the first year (44). Nursing teachers have a significant influence on how the teaching

content is adopted and how they are exposed to clinical settings. One way to improve teaching effectiveness in clinical nursing faculty is to increase their EI. In the field of research in the field of nursing education, a statistically significant positive relationship between EI and the effectiveness of clinical teaching was established, which indicates that more emotionally competent teachers will provide more successful clinical teaching. The results of the study support the idea that EI abilities are desirable for improving the effectiveness of clinical teaching in nursing. Nursing staff members must have a good understanding of their own emotions and how their actions affect students in order to help students learn in the clinical setting. In nursing colleges, emotional intelligence should be central. In nursing colleges, emotional intelligence should be a central component of education. Nurses continuously face their environment and must possess EI abilities. In a large part of the health care process, they deal with the physical, cognitive and social assessment of individuals, and therefore it is important to assess the emotional intelligence abilities of nursing students and include training for its development in the nursing curriculum (45, 46). There is an obvious need for teacher development and a stronger connection between teachers and students, which have implications for clinical teaching practice (47).

### Emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity

Moral sensitivity is necessary to provide high-quality care and to make wise choices in challenging workplace

situations. Healthcare is influenced by EI and ethical sensitivity. Ethical sensitivity places a relatively high value on EI. A nursing student who has a strong EI will be aware of emotions and how they affect moral judgment. Currently, educational institutions have a key responsibility for fostering ethical awareness in nursing students and updating the curriculum in this regard, especially in light of the recent increase in ethical challenges facing the healthcare system. This will prepare nurses to provide high-quality care in accordance with contemporary nursing philosophy and raise the status of their profession (48).

### CONCLUSION

Emotional intelligence (EI) is essential in the nursing profession since nurses deal with unforeseen situations on a daily basis for which they were not adequately prepared during their education. Emotional intelligence (EI) components should be included in educational programs in order to help students understand and control their emotions and to influence the improvement of care standards. It would be preferable if EI had been assessed prior to admission to nursing programs, and then compared after graduation or when applying for jobs. The enhancement of emotional intelligence in nursing would benefit all parties involved in the health system, particularly patients, by raising the standard of nursing care.

There is no conflict of interest.

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## EMOCIONALNA INTELIGENCIJA U SESTRINSTVU

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### SAŽETAK

Medicinske sestre su često izložene radu pod pritiskom, izazovima donošenja iznimno brzih i odgovornih odluka te suočavanju s tuđom boli, patnjom i gubitcima. Od svih zdravstvenih djelatnika provode najviše vremena uz pacijenta stvarajući poseban odnos temeljen na povjerenju. Nekada je to bio intuitivno vođen proces u kojem su medicinske sestre bile više ili manje uspješne. Danas, u sestrinstvu temeljenom na činjenicama, svjesni smo koliko je emocionalna inteligencija važan čimbenik u svim segmentima sestrinstva i sestriinskog obrazovanja. Fizički umor medicinskim sestrama predstavlja manji problem u odnosu na emocionalnu iscrpljenost i umor od suosjećanja. Stoga je nužna učinkovita emocionalna regulacija koja bi unaprijedila poslovno zadovoljstvo. Upravljanje emocijama se postiže razvijanjem emocionalne inteligencije koja postaje sveprisutniji pojam u sestrinstvu posljednjih godina. Najpoželjniji zaposlenici u zdravstvu (i drugdje) su oni razvijenih akademskih intelektualnih sposobnosti, ali i emocionalne inteligencije. Uz pomoć sastavnica emocionalne inteligencije bi se mogao objasniti unutarnji mehanizam specifičnog odnosa sestra - pacijent koji dokazano pomaže, kako pacijentu u postizanju povoljnih ishoda zdravstvene njege, tako i samim medicinskim sestrama u djelovanju i razumijevanju same esencije sestrinstva. Emocionalna inteligencija kao mentalna vještina pomaže pojedincu u raznim osobnim, društvenim, profesionalnim, komunikacijskim i financijskim domenama poput: upravljanja vremenom, donošenja odluka, isporuke usluga, odgovornosti, empatije, prezentacijskih vještina, tolerancije na stres, povjerenja i upravljanja komunikacijom. Ovim preglednim radom će se pokušati predočiti njena važnost u sestrinstvu.

**Ključne riječi:** emocionalna inteligencija, sestrinstvo, empatija, komunikacija

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