

Self-disclosure during medical encounters

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Should you reveal personal aspects of your life to patients? In some cases, self-disclosure can be helpful; in others, it can certainly be counterproductive. How are you to judge?

You must bear in mind that when patients go to a doctor, they are first going to the profession, the institution, the Physician with a capital "P." Only after they get past that do they deal with the doctor as a person. You are primarily the representative of a tradition, of an institution, and, ultimately, of the health care system. You, as an individual, are of secondary importance.

To project friendliness in social conversation, you usually reveal as much about yourself as the people you are talking with reveal about themselves. It is inadvisable to divulge too much, particularly to reveal a great deal more than the people you are speaking with do.¹ Doing so might make these people feel uncomfortable, and they might resort to containment strategies to keep you from disclosing too much.

In professional relationships, people are not expected to reveal themselves. Physicians, however, always disclose something about themselves to their patients. The question is, how much do you reveal? For example, the way you speak, move, and dress, your office decor, and your family pictures are all clues to your non-professional life. Usually, such disclosure is of no consequence, but there will always be a few patients who make inappropriate use of this information.² Apart from what these visual clues unintentionally reveal, physicians might also choose to disclose information about their personal lives to patients. This is more likely to happen when there is an established professional relationship. Still, for physicians, such self-disclosure is a step away from a known situation into a new uncertain one, and they immediately risk losing credibility with patients.

Advantages and disadvantages

There are advantages and disadvantages to self-disclosure in professional relationships (Table 1). The principal advantage is the creation of a greater sense of closeness, greater sympathy, and a climate of trust. Self-disclosure adds credibility to the support you want to offer.³ This closeness, in turn, gives rise to other advantages, such as patients revealing information they would not otherwise share, patients being motivated to continue treatment, physicians alleviating patients' pain and concerns by normalizing situations ("Physicians are just like other people"), and patients taking their physicians as models.

The main disadvantage of self-disclosure is that physicians cross a boundary that separates their personal and professional roles² and must redefine their relationships with their patients. Generally, such redefinition involves greater intimacy and deeper mutual knowledge. The relationship becomes more like friendship, and its implications are different from those of the doctor-patient relationship. Friends have the right to make demands beyond the professional domain. If friendship between a doctor and patient develops, the physician's clinical judgment could be distorted. As the relationship changes, mutual rights and duties will be redefined.

In crossing the boundary between the personal and the professional, physicians open the door to reciprocal behaviour on the part of patients, who might demand more consultation time, display more signs of friendship, become too curious about physicians' personal lives, and even resort to seduction.² On this point, it is interesting to note that, without having revealed anything about themselves, 71% of female and 29% of male medical students report having been the object of sexual advances by a patient at least once during their training.⁴ This type of behaviour is even more likely to occur when physicians reveal something about themselves

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of self-disclosure

ADVANTAGES

- Improves patient support
- Creates a greater sense of closeness
- Helps patients reveal distress they would not otherwise express
- Reinforces patients' motivation by providing them with a model
- Creates a special bond between patient and physician
- Develops a mutually trusting relationship

DISADVANTAGES

- Expands the professional relationship into a personal and potentially intimate one
- Creates risk of having to deal with demands not directly related to the consultation
- Fosters strong emotions that will require management
- Opens the door to undesirable behaviour (patient's personal questions, seduction, etc)
- Provokes too much curiosity about physicians' personal lives (which can be embarrassing or disrupt their practices)
- Creates risk of psychological dependency by patients

because they open the door to the exploration of more personal aspects of their lives.

From a psychotherapeutic standpoint,⁵ self-disclosure is generally inadvisable because it might encourage all manner of speculation by patients about their physicians. The issue here is the phenomenon of transference. Self-disclosure also opens the way to exploitation of psychologically vulnerable patients.² Some physicians reveal things about themselves in order to satisfy their own needs. Such behaviour is to be avoided; it is not up to patients to support their doctors.⁶

Changing situation

Self-disclosure is not an all-or-nothing situation. Often, circumstances are such that physicians can allow themselves a certain amount of self-disclosure as long as they remain in control. They set new boundaries, and patients understand that. If they wish to revert to the earlier form of the relationship, they expect patients to understand that too. Patients might refuse to return to the relationship as it had previously been defined, however, and insist on maintaining the new one. The result is a singularly complex situation.

Patients sometimes try to change their relationships with their doctors by speaking in allusions rather than straightforwardly. The fact that patients do not verbalize clearly makes the situation more delicate because they can always claim their intentions have been misinterpreted. If this game of innuendo is allowed to continue, physicians can find themselves in embarrassing situations. In fact, as the innuendoes accumulate without eliciting a response, patients will eventually interpret physicians' silence as implicit consent. Consequently, it is generally preferable to clear up ambiguities as quickly as possible.

How much self-disclosure?

Before deciding whether to reveal something about themselves, physicians must know their patients well. They should have a single goal in mind when they do reveal

themselves: to help their patients. It is also important to determine how much self-disclosure is necessary. Too much might make patients back off if they think such self-disclosure inappropriate. Patients might also react with displays of strong emotion (eg, tears) or with unwarranted speculation.⁷ It is then up to physicians to take the time and make the effort to correct the situation.

Caution is essential because, in the normal course of practice, you must ask patients very personal questions and have very intimate physical contact with them. It is important that they interpret your actions correctly, as purely professional. Self-disclosure reduces the distance

between you as a person and your patient as a person and can make correct interpretation of your actions more difficult. It is important that physicians draw boundaries that are as clear as possible between them and their patients. If any awkwardness arises, it is the physician's responsibility to take the initiative and set clear limits.⁸



Self-disclosure is a step away from a known situation into a new uncertain one.

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