

MINDFUL COMMUNICATION: BEING PRESENT

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OBJECTIVES: *To review how mindfulness can be elicited in and strategically managed through communication, with a goal toward enhancing the patient/family relationship in the experience of cancer care.*

DATA SOURCES: *Published, peer-reviewed literature, research reports, and Web-based resources.*

CONCLUSION: *Mindful communication, an active process whereby the health care provider and patient/family unit are attentive to the timing, nature, and context of the dialogue exchange, helps direct care that is patient-centered, reflective, and relational.*

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING PRACTICE: *Oncology nurses using a patient-centered approach to communication will be more equipped to use mindfulness-based strategies that can potentially shift the way cancer care is delivered.*

KEY WORDS: *mindful communication, presence, active listening, mindfulness, silence, patient-centered communication.*

From the time of diagnosis and throughout the cancer experience, patients and their families look to their health care providers for not only medical guidance, but emotional support. At the core of this experience is the dialogue that exists between the

provider and the patient and family. All interaction between oncology patients and the medical team is mediated through communication. There is a substantial and convincing body of evidence that effective communication contributes to improved health-related quality-of-life outcomes.¹ Additionally, the health care professional's style and type of communication also contributes to better patient outcomes and is a fundamental requirement of high-quality cancer care.² In contrast, there is considerable evidence that poor communication is distressing to patients and damaging to the clinician-patient relationship,³ and that communication problems can contribute to physical harm and poor medical outcomes.⁴ Oncology nurses stand at the helm of cancer care delivery and are viewed as one of the most trusted members of the health care team. As a pivotal member of an interdisciplinary team, oncology nurses often facilitate critical

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conversations about goals of care, bear witness to suffering, and help navigate a health care system clad with opportunities for communication breakdown. Mindful communication and its practices offer insight into how clinicians can more actively engage and enhance communication that is patient-centered, reflective, and relational-based; an active process whereby the health care provider and patient/family unit are attentive to the timing, nature, and context of the dialogue exchange. The purpose of this article is to address how mindfulness can be elicited in and strategically managed through communication, with a goal toward how such behavior can contribute to and enhance the patient/family relationship in the experience of cancer care.

MINDFULNESS AND MINDFULNESS TRAINING

The concept of mindfulness has its roots in the Pali word, *sati*, meaning awareness, attention, and remembering. Situated in Eastern Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness produces the recognition of relationships between one's emotions and his or her physical and mental health. Mindfulness is a core component of Buddhist teachings and was taught as a means to relieve human suffering.⁵ It can be defined as the "ability to pay attention, moment-to-moment, to the unfolding of one's experiences".^{5,p.145} Mindfulness emphasizes an approach by which one develops a deep awareness of self and others and responds by bringing complete attention to the experiences occurring in the present moment in a nonjudgmental and accepting way with openness and curiosity. Mindfulness encompasses a wide range of formal and informal practices that encourage sustained attention as well as patience, trust, and acceptance.⁶ As a form of mental training, mindfulness can occur through a variety of exercises and interventions that involve stilling or emptying of the mind or intentionally bringing attention to an inner object such as the breath.⁷ The goal of mindfulness training is to teach individuals to recognize thoughts, emotions, and psychological sensations as they arise under conditions of impending stress. Chiesa and Serretti,⁸ in a meta-analysis on mindfulness training, reported its use as an effective strategy to improve nurses' mental health, including a reduction in anxiety and depression. Finally, mindfulness training has shown to promote

empathy in providers, increasing neuronal activity and neurochemicals associated with compassion.⁹

MINDFULNESS IN NURSING: CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

To provide clarity about the use of mindfulness in the context of nursing, White¹⁰ conducted a conceptual analysis paper on mindfulness. This work aimed to provide conceptual clarity to further identify its significance, use, and applications in nursing. At the heart of a concept analysis is to determine the defining attributes or those characteristics of the concept that appear over and over again. Five intricately connected critical attributes define mindfulness in nursing as: a "transformative process where one develops an increasing ability to 'experience being present,' with 'acceptance,' 'attention,' and 'awareness.'"^{10 p. 282} White suggests that mindfulness in nursing is a significant concept for the discipline with practical application for the well-being of nurses (self-care and self-compassion), the development and sustainability of therapeutic nursing actions (presence, empathy, patience of self and other), and holistic health promotion (nurses themselves must practice and integrate before applying to others).¹⁰

MINDFUL COMMUNICATION

Mindful communication includes the practice of mindful presence and encompasses the attributes of a nonjudgmental approach to patients, staying actively present in the moment, and being able to rapidly adapt to change in an interaction with a patient and family.¹¹ Mindful communication merges the idea of mindfulness with reflective, genuine, and adaptive communication.¹² In mindful communication, the interaction between those who are engaged in the communication exchange focuses on attending to, responding to, and perceiving information.¹² It is an interactional process where information is continually reframed and evaluated. Being present to the timing, nature, and context of the experience shapes information sense-making (the process by which people give meaning to experiences) and allows mindfulness to be present in the communication. Thus, in mindful communication, the information is continually analyzed

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