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SPECIAL ARTICLE

Empathy, loneliness, burnout, and life satisfaction in Chilean nurses of palliative care and homecare services[☆]

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KEYWORDS

Empathy;
Loneliness;
Life satisfaction;
Burnout;
Palliative care;
Homecare services

Abstract

Introduction: Empathy has been described as an essential competence of healthcare professionals who are working in palliative care and homecare services. In these services, usually accompanied by a high risk of physical and emotional burnout, empathy can play an important role in the improvement of occupational wellbeing. The aim of this study was to confirm the role of empathy in the prevention of loneliness and burn out, and in the promotion of life satisfaction.

Methods: In 2016, an observational study was carried out in Chile with professional nurses who were working in palliative care and homecare services. Empathy with the patients, loneliness, life satisfaction, and burnout were measured using psychometric scales. Correlation analyses were applied to confirm relationships among the elements measured.

Results: In a sample of 64 participants, positive correlations were confirmed between empathy and life satisfaction ($P=0.40$; $p=0.003$), and between empathy and professional experience ($P=0.29$; $p=0.04$). On the other hand, inverse correlations were confirmed between empathy and burnout ($P=-0.38$; $p=0.01$), and between empathy and loneliness ($P=-0.41$; $p=0.004$).

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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Soledad;
Satisfacción vital;
Agotamiento laboral;
Cuidados paliativos;
Atención domiciliaria

Conclusions: These findings confirm the important role that empathy plays in the prevention of loneliness and burnout, and in the promotion of life satisfaction. Evidence found suggests that empathetic abilities can be improved by the professional experience.

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Empatía, soledad, desgaste y satisfacción personal en Enfermeras de cuidados paliativos y atención domiciliaria de Chile

Resumen

Introducción: La empatía ha sido descrita como una competencia esencial de los profesionales sanitarios que trabajan en servicios de cuidados paliativos y atención domiciliaria. En estos servicios, normalmente acompañados por un alto riesgo de desgaste físico y emocional, la empatía puede jugar un importante papel en la mejora del bienestar ocupacional. El objetivo de este estudio fue confirmar el papel de la empatía en la prevención de la soledad y el desgaste, y en la promoción de la satisfacción vital.

Métodos: En 2016, un estudio observacional fue realizado en Chile con profesionales de enfermería que estaban trabajando en cuidados paliativos y en servicios de atención domiciliaria. La empatía con los pacientes, la soledad, la satisfacción vital y el desgaste fueron medidos utilizando escalas psicométricas. Se aplicaron análisis de correlación para confirmar las relaciones entre los elementos medidos.

Resultados: En una muestra de 64 participantes, se confirmaron correlaciones positivas entre la empatía y la satisfacción vital ($P=0,40$; $p=0,003$), y entre la empatía y la experiencia profesional ($P=0,29$; $p=0,04$). Por otra parte, se confirmaron correlaciones inversas entre la empatía y el desgaste ($P=-0,38$; $p=0,01$), y entre la empatía y la soledad ($P=-0,41$; $p=0,004$).

Conclusiones: Estos hallazgos confirman el importante papel que la empatía juega en la prevención de la soledad y el desgaste, y en la promoción de la satisfacción vital. La evidencia encontrada sugiere que las habilidades empáticas se pueden mejorar por la experiencia profesional.

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What is known?

- Empathy in the context of professional patient care is a skill that is highly cognitive rather than emotional, and essential in nursing.
- Empathy enriches relationships with patients, enables patients to collaborate in their treatment and enhances care.
- Because more people are experiencing loneliness, patients attended in domiciliary and palliative care services require more emotional attention from their carers.
- Nursing professionals working in these services tend to be exposed to an intense emotional load and are at more risk of stress in the workplace.

What does this paper contribute?

- It demonstrates the role of empathy in nurturing nurses' health and wellbeing.
- Empathy helps to prevent loneliness and burnout for nurses exposed to an intense emotional load.
- Empathy is a skill that can be enhanced by learning through professional experience.
- The positive role of empathy in patient care is demonstrated through the nurses' perceived life satisfaction.

Introduction

Human relationships play a very important role in health-care and disease prevention.¹ When the human relationships of the chronically sick and the elderly break down, their risk of social isolation and of developing further illnesses increases.^{2,3} Therefore, the relationships many of these people develop with health professionals and carers play a very

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