

ESSENTIAL SOFT SKILLS FOR DOCTORS

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“The practice of Medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head” – Sir William Osler 1849-1919.

Around the globe doctors are considered as gifted human beings. They have exceptional memory to retain a lot of information that need to be stored perfectly and be retrievable swiftly. All this is commonly required under extremely stressful conditions. They are altruistic and they have been known for sacrifices of family lives and at times their own lives. They remain consciously focused on improving their technical skills by taking examinations and attaining degrees and diplomas. The system in this part of the world is such that certain skills remain under focused among the doctors. These skills if acquired in early career become part of the personality and would help all professionals in making their journey of life enjoyable and smooth.

Patients have their fears about the outcomes of their illnesses, they are worried about being embarrassed, hurt and they are worried about the financial implications in the form of cost as well the loss due to absence from work. For all these issues they look up to their doctors and expect to be looked after and the doctors do so. Certain soft skills, if developed by the doctors, would have significant impact not only on the outcome of the patients but also put a halt to process of ethical decay of the profession.

Soft Skills for Doctors

Young doctors are empathetic and caring about their patients. But somehow, they avoid leadership roles, face difficulty in getting connected to the staff and at times lack warmth towards patients, colleagues and their own families. The soft skills that are being mentioned here are easy to learn. These need practice from early career and their impact is fabulous. These are:

1. Empathy

Empathy not only improves job satisfaction, but can help

in preventing burnout. You can decipher the reason why 'You' were chosen to be in this profession if you are compassionate. Doctors have to be empathetic towards their patients, colleagues and above all their own families. Feeling so is important but communicating this feeling is even more important because only Allah knows what is in your heart. Listening to people and addressing their concerns earns trust and goodwill. They follow the treatment plans well, which improves the treatment outcomes.¹

2. Work Ethics

Adhering to the official timings, positive attitude, will to contribute to the best of ones' capabilities, spirit to learn and grow and being dutiful is being ethical. Long tiring working hours and surprises on a daily basis are norms in this profession. The force of strong work ethics helps us sail through this rough ocean. This also keeps us motivated to excel technically in our specialties.²

3. Communication Skills

Doctors need effective communication skills. They have to master this skill keeping in mind the variety of people that they come across daily. Clear explanation of the patients' conditions to the patients and attendants is required on regular basis. Sound communication leads to patients' satisfaction, trust and improved compliance to treatment.³ Clear communication with staff and teams lead to improved performance and avoids confusions. Use of proper verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal components of communication leave positive lasting effects. As the doctors move up the hierarchy, they have to focus more on listening skills so that the communicators feel that they have been listened to.

4. Stress Management

A sound patient care comes from a relaxed mind.

Keeping appropriately cool under stressful conditions is important because pressure leads to blurred mind which impairs decision making. A doctor has to be in a state of perfect physical and mental health to give the best output. Under extreme stress, the decision to take a break is very important to avoid irreparable damage. Doctors have to know the limits of the profession and explain this to the patients and attendants. A sound soul is backed by a sound body which needs ample sleep, regular exercise and proper time management.⁴

5. Emotional Intelligence

Emotions influence our lives as doctors, as patients and as attendants. Self-awareness recognizes when your mental state is affecting your competence. Emotional perception enables you to accurately identify various emotions both in yourself and in others. Emotional understanding enables you to understand the influence of emotional state on your decisions and others. Emotion management leads to self-control to avoid the influence of our emotional state on our judgement and decisions. Emotion utilization would help doctors in using their emotional states to improve their working and the emotional states of others to improve team work.⁵

6. Team Work

Doctors are expected to perform in teams. Learning to work in teams is one of the important soft skills to be learnt. Each team has a leader while rest have to follow the instructions of the leader. Working in teams improves clinical care. In teams people share and learn from each other's experience. Teamwork significantly reduces the chances of errors through collective wisdom. The team feels much more confident when they work together. Tasks are divided hence the assignment is completed easily. A positive rapport with team members results in improved patient care. In teams, people learn much faster than learning in isolation.⁶

7. Presentation Skills

Presentations are part and parcel of medical profession. To be an effective professional, one needs to learn these and they make a lot of difference. Good presentation skills are backbone of multidisciplinary management of patients, because to convey your point and convince your colleagues for a plan you do need a convincing presentation style. This soft skill needs to be learnt and practiced again and again.⁷

8. Leadership

Every doctor has to learn to be a leader. A leader motivates his team members so that they can work to the best of their capabilities. A leader is expected to discuss with his team members and improve the quality of care through feedback. Frequent interactions as a leader result in improved confidence of the team.⁸ Some are born leaders but most have to be made through formal courses like MBA and MPH. Doctors intending to be in leadership roles should undertake such courses and will enable them to perform better. This is true both for health care administrators and specialists.

9. Reflection & Feedback

Mastering the arts of reflection and feedback improves the performance of doctors. Reflection is an everyday learning tool of doctors. It helps in gaining new insights into our daily experiences. A reflective diary is great help for others as well. Being observed and getting feedback triggers reflection in action skills modification. Feedback improves knowledge, skills and above all attitude of doctors. Effective feedback has to be timely, specific and focused on objective behaviours. These soft skills are essential to develop early on.⁹

10. Growth Mindset

Anticipating, accepting and preparing for change is the biggest challenge in all professions. This comes from a growth mindset. One can only enjoy the change if the professional has adequately covered the 1st three steps before change. Growth in all spheres of professional and personal life is essential. But a very important growth is that a doctors should add on to humility as they grow in their profession. This will not only make them bigger in the eyes of others but will also enhance the impression of the profession.¹⁰

Conclusion

As the human beings grow, they develop certain skills naturally. Learning continues in all professions. Like technical skills, soft skills could also be learnt and polished. Enabling doctors to develop certain soft skills make their journey through the profession easier. A will to improve and inculcation of growth mindset would help doctors in striving to be better professionals and human beings. So, keep growing! keep learning!.

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