

Conceptualizing Narrative Health in Human-Facing Professions to Develop Cultural Competence and Improve Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Narrative health is a technique that healthcare professionals can use to connect with patients. The events of 2020, including the global severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), have identified that patient care is largely dependent upon relationships within the healthcare environment. Relationships in the healthcare environment are established through a trusting exchange between the patient and provider, and one technique to develop this relationship and trust is through narrative health. Narrative health provides the exchange of information between patient and provider in a discussion-like manner, or narrative health. This strategy promotes cultural competence amongst the healthcare professional team and improves communication between the patient and provider. Narrative health is an important concept for healthcare professionals to understand, and narrative health should be a part of any healthcare professional's toolbox, especially in vulnerable times like the COVID pandemic. The inclusion of narrative health in practice has the potential to improve patient outcomes and empower healthcare professionals and patients.

Keywords: COVID-19; narrative health; cultural competence; improved communication

INTRODUCTION

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) causing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic exposes critical communication and information gaps that contribute to health disparities among vulnerable populations [1]. Narrative health in human-facing professions, like medicine and nursing, is a professional approach in healthcare and a strategy focusing on optimizing relationships, adequate communication, effective patient care, and professionalism. It relies on engagement, cooperation, building relationships with stakeholders, and reflection on the inspiration that drove the individual to choose the healthcare profession. Narrative health aims to enhance human relations and the environment of care through collaboration, boosting motivation, and dedication through inspiration to ensure the best possible outcomes. The narrative approach to health and medicine may help develop cultural competency by improving

communication, enhancing interaction, and inspiring authenticity in human relations among people from different walks of life. Humans use narratives to make sense of life [2].

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Health communication practitioners recognize the positive benefits of storytelling as a narrative approach to convey health information between healthcare professionals and patients [3]. Namely, one of the primary focuses of the narrative approach is to enhance communication in healthcare. The narrative approach seeks to develop careful listening, observation, and speaking skills critical for the adequate delivery of the services that health professionals provide, and careful reading and speaking skills are important to consider in the process of narrative health [4]. Training individuals on narrative approaches occurs by engaging in different communication scenarios to analyze and practice these critical skills. They practice observation, attentive listening and engagement, appropriate response, developing connections and trust, and all other aspects of effective communication in the training sessions [4].

Emphasis on the need for critical analysis and evaluation of communication is vital to improve outcomes in healthcare. Promoting narrative health training is the best strategy to help providers improve communication and interactions. The trainees are also equipped with other critical skills like empathy, accommodation, and understanding to enable better communication and interaction⁵. The narrative health strategy is a professional approach to developing essential skills at the professional level to facilitate teamwork between the health providers and the patient to determine the most effective treatment.

When these critical skills are developed in training sessions, it helps facilitate acquisition of the narrative approach. Trainers can help human-facing professions develop the narrative skills. While training is helpful for developing the narrative approach skills, it is not essential to develop these skills. Human-facing professionals, like physicians and nurses, that wish to engage in a narrative approach to care can use listening and discussion to engage the patient in a dialogue to develop a narrative that will enhance trust and adherence to the healthcare plan.

AUTHENTIC HUMAN RELATIONS

The narrative approach focuses on collaboration among different health professionals, patients, families, and other relevant parties to enhance service delivery. Solidifying high-quality care is dependent on the effective engagement and participation of stakeholders, and it is another benefit of narrative health. More importantly, the need for highly developed narrative health competencies among human-facing professions facilitates a relationship between provider and patient that addresses cultural differences and concerns. Healthcare professionals must have the human relation skills to handle cultural differences and maximize interactions as this is paramount for trust between provider and patient⁶. Therefore, the healthcare provider must develop and consciously improve their narrative health and collaborative skills to actively implement collaboration as they work with the interprofessional team in the delivery of care for the patient. Critical expertise to handle challenges like language barriers, religious beliefs, practices, resistance to care, noncompliance, family participation, professional differences and others that inhibit collaboration results in improvements in health outcomes [5]. The narrative approach helps to build cultural competence and understanding of differences and the way those in the human-facing helping professions develop relationships with patients for a trusting and collaborative approach to care.

The narrative approach also places emphasis on collaboration in healthcare settings. It requires consultative decision-making among different health experts and the engagement of the patient and families in the process. The approach is enabled by discussions, meetings, personal communication, negotiations, and consultations. This ensures engagement and trust to share experiences, and this further develops an awareness about the difference [5]. Such a thorough process enhances understanding of differences and perceptions of individuals and their healthcare practices. A narrative approach promotes accommodation and collaboration, and it leads to the achievement of high-quality care. These are all important tools for building relationships that focus on understanding through a narrative health approach. Narrative health allows the patient to be an active participant in their health journey through feelings of empowerment that place the patient in an active role in their health.

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The narrative approach also emphasizes the importance of professionalism, effectiveness, and growth that can only be achieved through best practices and collaboration. It identifies the need for enlightenment and learning to build competence and expertise throughout the life of the healthcare provider. Those in the human-facing helping professions develop critical competencies like professional conduct, accountability, consultation, communication, and interaction that then helps to enhance the relationship with the rest of the stakeholders. The strategy then enables the improvement of skills to enhance collaboration with other health stakeholders in the delivery of health services [6]. A narrative health approach leads to the realization that success depends on the ability to collaborate and work with others, and this leads the individual to focus on developing the narrative competencies to promote health and wellness in patients. In turn, this facilitates the improvement of relationships between provider and patients and improves healthcare.

The narrative approach emphasizes the need for application-based training and not just abstract, classroom-based instructions. Practitioners participate in practice exercises where they directly engage potential peers and clients to develop, implement, and improve critical competencies. The training session should promote engagement by including diverse environments, and this ensures that healthcare providers gain expertise and skills to handle patients from diverse backgrounds. The strategy ensures that those in human-facing helping professions exercise accumulated knowledge, and this enhances skill development [5]. Once done with initial training, healthcare professionals embark on the process of developing skills to enhance their effectiveness. The experience healthcare professionals with diverse skills to develop relationships with people from different cultures.

The narrative approach builds cultural competency through effective communication, human relationships, and relationship development. It requires the development and application of critical communication skills like attentiveness, listening, observation, and appropriate response. However, it also mandates collaborative working through engagement and joint decision-making, and this promotes interaction and understanding of essential differences. Even more critically, the narrative approach encourages continuous engagement and development of skills to enhance competence to work in human-facing professions like healthcare. Joint collaboration between patients and healthcare providers is the best approach to interact with and understand others to develop cultural competence, essential for a narrative approach.

Conceptualizing the term narrative health through the exploration of theoretical linkages is fundamental to the process [7]. Exploring the qualitative research underpinnings that investigators use in the study of health concepts and experiences provides awareness with the recognizable benefits of narrative approaches in health messaging and communication. These benefits include:

1. The interrelationship between health and life issues;
2. The benefits of good health that people take for granted;
3. Coherence or lack relating to good health as a norm;
4. Temporal issues;
5. Health as a moral practice.

NARRATIVE HEALTH AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural competence is an important aspect of health, and a lack of cultural competence is related to health disparities and poor patient outcomes. Cultural competence means that health professionals accept the individual and embrace humility that may exist as a result of cultural differences. It is a complex phenomenon, and all those involved in health care are charged with the task of providing culturally competent care with colleagues, patients, and families [8]. It is important to realize that approaching health from a narrative perspective is a powerful tool to develop relationships with patients and engage in a culturally competent manner with patients.

COVID-19 AND THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19 and the pandemic has caused undue stress to the healthcare system that permeates all aspects of care. From patients having limited visitors and companions during crucial appointments to requiring face masks for all visits, these changes have served to isolate the patient during crucial health appointments. This approach has made healthcare seem less patient-centered and has alienated many patients from being an active role in their health journey. Healthcare professionals using a narrative approach can help restore the humanistic component of healthcare back to the equation. Narrative health is a tool that all healthcare professionals can use in their practice. It is free, it does not take that much time, and it goes a long way towards empowering patients.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the narrative approach to health and medicine derive from qualitative research and have promise for improving outcomes. The primary benefits of narrative health and medicine include improvements in communication, empathy, collaboration, teamwork, and relationship building. Improving interprofessional skills between providers and dialogue between providers and patients establishes a foundation for understanding cultural competence.

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