

Occupational Empathy

Category: Hope

written by Aishwarya Iyer | December 21, 2016

On my first day shadowing an occupational therapist, I learned much more than I had anticipated.

We saw five patients that morning—with each one, the OT went through a series of exercises to test their strength and mobility. The first four visits were interesting, though uneventful, as the patients completed their exercises with varying degrees of success.

The last patient was a man with a history of alcoholism. He had a tube in his throat, which prevented him from speaking. A resident outside the room informed us that no one had been able to get him to cooperate. Judging by the smirk on his face, he didn't think we were going to get anywhere, either.

The patient sat rigidly in the bed, his neck stiff. His eyes, unseeing, were fixed on the TV screen. I was intimidated, but the OT was undeterred. With a smile on her face, she greeted the man and launched into a series of questions. Surprisingly, after a few minutes, he warmed up to her, and the tension began to fade. I began to have hope that where the others had failed, we would succeed.

Because the patient couldn't speak, the OT handed him a paper and a pen. While this worked at first, I noticed that as her questions became more specific, he had trouble getting his message across. As she struggled to interpret his handwriting, he lost his temper.

The pen clattered against the wall, and as the paper sank to the floor, so did my heart. The patient had completely closed off to us—we were back at square one.

Though I had lost hope, the OT never did. No matter how angry or uncooperative the patient, she retained her sense of enthusiasm and used empathy to connect, in a way that the other health care providers I had observed did not. Though she later apologized to me about that tense encounter, I felt fortunate to have witnessed it.

That day, I learned so much more than just the value of an OT to the medical team. I learned the importance of empathizing with patients and seeing things from their perspective, and never losing hope, even in the face of adversity.

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