

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Healthcare

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a key component of human growth, increasingly recognized as essential for success in the workplace. EI, is often defined as “the ability to adaptively notice, comprehend, manage, and harness emotions in oneself and others,” is increasingly recognized as essential in the demanding environment of healthcare. The concept has evolved over decades, with contributions from scholars such as Edward Thorndike, Howard Gardner, and Daniel Goleman, who identified EI as crucial to personal and professional effectiveness.

In the healthcare setting, EI fosters stronger doctor–patient relationships, effective communication, and improved decision-making, particularly in stressful situations. It also helps healthcare professionals collaborate, resolve conflicts, and maintain empathy and composure. Studies have shown that emotionally intelligent healthcare workers build better connections with patients and colleagues, improving both patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes.

This commentary explores the importance of EI through a case-based scenario depicting doctor–patient relationship and importance of teamwork in quality patient care through various aspects of EI. It explains the five core characteristics of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills are illustrated. In conclusion, EI is indispensable applied to the healthcare setting. It is proven to enhance patient care, build effective team, strengthen relationships, navigate the emotional complexities of clinical practice with empathy, resilience, and improved decision-making.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Empathy, Healthcare, Patient care, Self-awareness, Self-motivation, Self-regulation, Social-skills, Teamwork.

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INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence (EI) can be best described as “the ability to adaptively notice, comprehend, manage, and harness emotions in oneself and others.”¹ Emotional intelligence is often confused with terms such as social intelligence, cognitive intelligence, emotional competence, empathy, etc. Cognitive intelligence centers on analytical and problem-solving abilities, while EI involves the recognition, understanding, and management of emotions in both oneself and others. Social intelligence, a component of EI, entails understanding social dynamics and effectively interacting with others. Emotional competence refers to specific skills within EI, like empathy and emotional regulation, rather than the overall concept of EI.

The concept of EI has evolved over many decades. Edward Thorndike introduced social intelligence in the 1930s, emphasizing the need for knowing and communicating with others. During the 1940s, the idea of noncognitive intelligence was created by David Wechsler, stating that noncognitive intelligence like personality, emotions, and social skills is necessary for success in life and that intelligence cannot be considered fully developed until these noncognitive components are identified. In the 1950s, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced the idea that individuals could enhance their emotional resilience by satisfying their fundamental needs, such as safety, belonging, and self-esteem, as part of their journey toward self-actualization. Howard Gardner elaborated on these concepts in 1975 with his theory of multiple intelligences which suggests that intelligence is multifaceted and he identified eight types of intelligence, including linguistic, logical–mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic.² Subsequently, in 1983, Howard Gardner highlighted the relevance of interpersonal

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and intrapersonal intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand and interact effectively with others. This includes empathy, social skills, and the ability to work well in groups. Intrapersonal intelligence is the ability to understand oneself, one’s thoughts, and one’s feelings. This includes self-awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to set goals.² Wayne Payne coined the phrase “emotional intelligence” in his 1985 dissertation, where he highlighted that the ability to comprehend and regulate emotions—especially fear, pain, and desire—is essential for emotional growth and intellectual development.³ In 1987, Keith Beasley introduced “emotional quotient (EQ)” to *Mensa Magazine*, emphasizing that EQ measures aspects such as sensitivity, emotional awareness, and the ability to express feelings. The notion gained popularity in 1990, when Peter Salovey and John Mayer wrote a seminal article on ability-based emotional intelligence models and proposed four branches: emotional perception, emotional assimilation, emotional understanding, and emotional management. These abilities serve to advance the

development of new intelligence and more intelligent techniques for forming relationships based on trust.⁴ Daniel Goleman's 1995 book, "emotional intelligence" proposed EI performance model and defines EI as a set of abilities and competences that influence manager and leader's effectiveness at work. The four capacities that are the center of those skills and competences are social awareness, self-awareness, relationship management, and self-management. Finally, in 1997, Bar-On's mixed model defined EI as a system of interrelated behavior supported by social and emotional competencies that affect behavior and performance. In Bar-On's EI five EI scales that are self-perception, self-expression, interpersonal, decision-making, and stress management drive model, human behavior, and relationships.^{4,5} The evolution of EI has been depicted in Figure 1.

Daniel Goleman, who contributed to the popularization of EI, proposed the five characteristics of EI which include self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills. The characteristics of EI are depicted in Figure 2.

Emotional intelligence is a key component of human growth, increasingly recognized as essential for success in the

workplace. Individuals with higher EI tend to have improved coping strategies, mental wellness, and stress management skills. In the professional environment, strong EI enables individuals to inspire and motivate others, fostering a positive work atmosphere and enhancing productivity. Moreover, those with high EI often excel in decision-making, problem-solving, and adapting to change—skills that are crucial in today's fast-paced and dynamic business world.

Emotional Intelligence in Healthcare

In the field of healthcare, where doctors are considered next to God, being emotionally intelligent is very crucial to working in a team, managing conflicts, maintaining doctor-patient relationships, effective communication, empathy, and understanding emotions of others.

There are many studies that state that EI can improve teamwork, patient care, interprofessional relationships, and clinical environment. A study done in Turkey found a positive and statistically significant relationship between patient satisfaction and EI scores of nurses using emotional intelligence scale, which

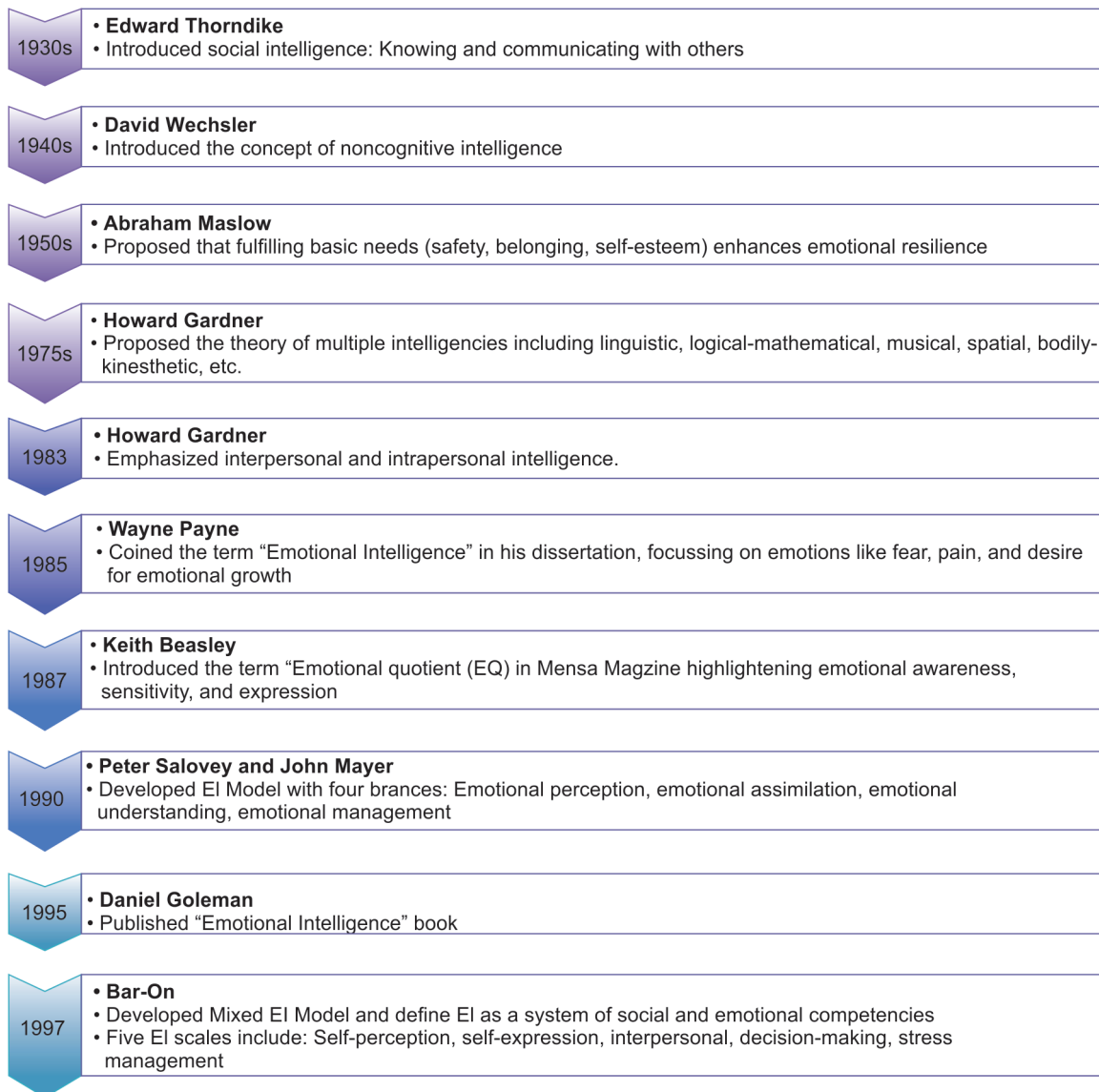


Fig. 1: Evolution of EI

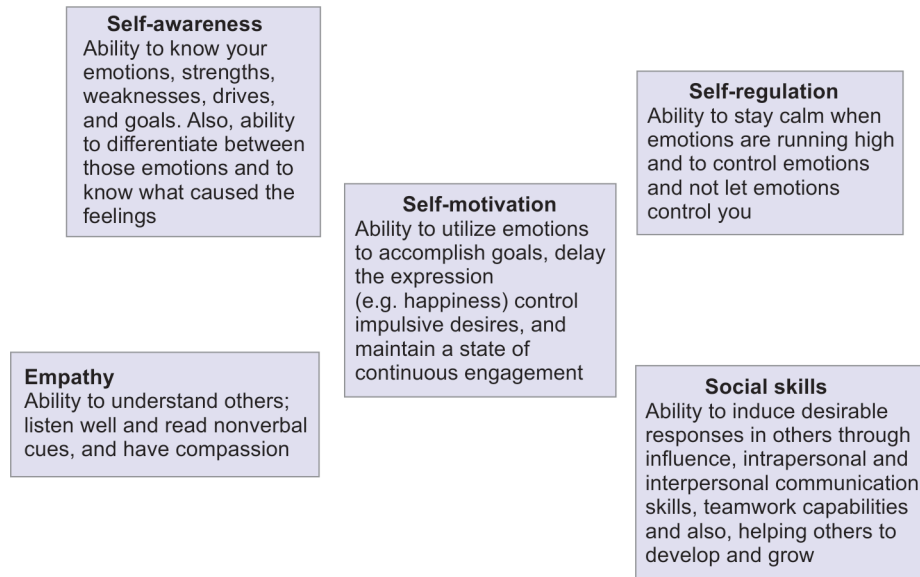


Fig. 2: Characteristics of EI

is a 33-item self-report scale to assess EI.⁶ Emotional intelligence improves patient satisfaction when healthcare providers identify patients' needs, concerns, worries, and emotions. A study by Chabeli⁷ states that EI is essential in improving clinical decision-making, as it helps healthcare professionals regulate emotions, sharpen critical thinking, and make thoughtful, empathetic choices, which contribute to delivering superior patient care. Studies also indicate that healthcare professionals with strong EI tend to build empathetic connections with patients and colleagues. Their self-control helps them stay composed under pressure and communicate effectively, leading to better decision-making in stressful situations.^{8,9} Frias et al.¹⁰ conducted a pre- and postsurvey to assess the impact of EI training for nurses. About 2-hour EI sessions were held, as well as a pre- and postsurvey that included the trait emotional intelligence questionnaire scale. The study indicated an improvement in EI following training sessions among nurses, leading to greater emotional awareness, stress management, and improved patient care among nurses. Emotional intelligence is associated with relational leadership models, like transformational leadership, which are associated with better patient outcomes.¹¹ Contemporary leadership training programs are integrating EI development, as it enhances healthcare leaders' abilities to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and inspire their teams. This is particularly vital in high-stress settings such as hospitals and public health institutions.¹² The role of EI can be explored through the following case scenario, utilizing Goleman's model (1998) of EI to highlight key competencies critical for effective healthcare leadership and patient care.

Case Scenario

Dr Rajat was a renowned surgeon in a multispecialty hospital who was supervising Akshita, a junior doctor eager to apply her clinical knowledge. One day, Mr Pawan, a patient with a complex medical history of cardiac problems and hypertension, visited hospital with throat pain and an inability to swallow. After a thorough examination, he was diagnosed with second-stage throat cancer (squamous cell carcinoma). As they worked together to care for Mr Pawan, Dr Rajat demonstrated various aspects of EI to Akshita and team members.

Self-awareness

Mr Pawan entered the consultation room with visible discomfort and a sense of apprehension. Dr Rajat greeted him warmly, inviting him to share his concerns. As Mr Pawan began to describe his throat pain and difficulty swallowing, Dr Rajat listened attentively, maintaining eye contact and offering reassuring words. His calm attitude helped put Mr Pawan at ease, allowing him to open up about his symptoms.

After gathering the necessary information, Dr Rajat gently guided Mr Pawan through a series of diagnostic tests. The results confirmed the presence of second-stage throat cancer. Whereas Akshita's attention remained on the medical aspects of the diagnosis, Dr Rajat has been keenly observing Mr Pawan's behavior, which has shifted from the initial anxiety to deepened fear and uncertainty.

Recognizing this, Dr Rajat did not panic or get overwhelmed and addressed Mr Pawan calmly, acknowledging not only the physical challenges he was facing but also the emotional burden of the diagnosis. Dr Rajat's emotions (calm and composed) allowed him to understand how his own emotions and reactions could influence Mr Pawan's experience. By being integrated into both his feelings and those of his patient, Dr Rajat was able to connect more deeply with Mr Pawan, ensuring that his emotional needs were met alongside his medical care.

Through this phase of the case, Dr Rajat demonstrated self-awareness level of EI, which involves recognizing one's own emotions and understanding how they influence others. The calmness and awareness of his own emotions helped Dr Rajat understand how Mr Pawan felt, which helped him connect with him more deeply, build trust, and make room for conversation.

Self-regulation

The surgical team was under increased stress as Mr Pawan's condition deteriorated due to his ongoing chemotherapy treatments. As Akshita was in her initial career stage and was managing her first cancer patient and she was finding it difficult to handle the emotional stress of the situation. She struggled to maintain her composure while witnessing

the deteriorating health condition of Mr Pawan, whereas Dr Rajat maintained a composed demeanor throughout the entire experience.

Following a particularly difficult chemotherapy session one afternoon, Akshita confided in Dr Rajat about her feelings. She acknowledged that the situation's emotional toll was starting to interfere with her ability to concentrate, and she was concerned about how this could affect her career. After giving it a thought, Dr Rajat related a few of his early experiences to Akshita describing times when he faced similar emotionally intense situations and gradually learned to stay composed. He guided her to stay calm in the stressful situations which shall enable her to think more clearly and make sound decisions.

This phase of the case is demonstrating self-regulation aspect of EI. Self-regulation is defined as the capacity to maintain composure in the face of intense emotions. People who are self-regulated and maintain mental clarity and calmness are able to master emotional regulation rather than allowing emotions to rule them.¹ Akshita learned how to deal with stressful events in hospital and how to maintain composure by mentally preparing herself and taking deep breaths. With all of these instances, Dr Rajat is transforming Akshita into a capable and flexible healthcare professional.

Empathy

As the weeks passed and Mr Pawan's treatment progressed, Akshita started creating her own techniques for reducing stress and maintaining composure, which progressively increased her confidence in tackling challenging cases. She started maintaining an emotional journal, practice daily meditation, adopt optimistic viewpoints, consider her actions before taking them, and listen with compassion.

During a follow-up appointment, Dr Rajat observed that Mr Pawan appeared to be troubled by more than just his illness. After completing the necessary medical assessments, Dr Rajat decided to take a moment to sit down with Mr Pawan and talk, not just as a doctor, but as someone who genuinely cared about his well-being. Dr Rajat saw symptoms of severe emotional distress throughout his examination, including a troubled look, hesitancy in his speaking, and an overall sense of anxiousness.

Mr Pawan talked freely about his concerns, which included the medical bills of his treatment, its effect on his family, and the immense guilt he felt from being a burden. Dr Rajat calmly listened while providing consolation and useful guidance to help him with his financial issues. Mr Pawan felt reassured and regained strength from this empathetic conversation. It was a great lesson in "empathy" for Akshita. She discovered that providing good patient care entails more than simply treating physical symptoms; it also entails attending to their practical and emotional issues.

Through this phase, Dr Rajat demonstrated empathy by knowing and comprehending other people's situations, paying attention, and recognizing nonverbal clues of patients, which is a crucial component of the doctor-patient interaction. Dr Rajat recognized Mr Pawan's distress through his body language and troubled expression. He also paid close attention to Mr Pawan's worries about medical bills and family stress. Dr Rajat's calm and patient listening, along with his considerate responses, demonstrated his empathy toward Mr Pawan's emotional challenges, offering both practical support and emotional comfort. The method used by Dr Rajat demonstrated how crucial it is to treat and assist the whole individual (physically and mentally) on their path to recovery.

Self-motivation

In spite of the increasing difficulties and circumstances growing more complicated, Dr Rajat's attention remained fixed toward patient care. Motivated by a profound dedication to his patients, Dr Rajat was committed to treating Mr Pawan through this challenging phase. Every day he approached with fresh enthusiasm, bringing a tangible feeling of purpose to his work that enveloped everyone around him.

When Akshita saw this that Dr Rajat was genuinely motivated to see his patients recover and thrive, she developed a change in her own outlook. Dr Rajat's passion toward patients highly inspired her to pursue the same degree of commitment. Dr Rajat's unwavering commitment to giving the greatest care possible fostered a good environment in the surgical unit that encouraged other team members to pursue excellence in their work.

This phase of self-motivation of EI demonstrates passion and dedication toward work, feeling of purpose, and optimism to achieve the desired goals. Dr Rajat here demonstrates the perfect example of self-motivation by persistent enthusiasm and profound dedication toward patients, which not only benefits his patients but also inspires his team to strive for excellence.

Social Skills

Throughout the treatment process, the positive and supportive environment cultivated by Dr Rajat in his department created a sense of trust with his team members and rapport with Mr Pawan which allowed more effective communication. Mr Pawan felt that he was being heard, supported, and motivated during his entire treatment process, whereas his team members were positively influenced and motivated by Dr Rajat's soft skills.

Dr Rajat's leadership was evident as he ensured a positive learning environment for Akshita. Akshita was comfortable asking questions, expressing her concerns, emotions and also discussing what she was observing by encouraging open dialogue. Dr Rajat helped Akshita deepen her understanding of both the medical and emotional aspects of patient care.

This phase demonstrated social skills including leadership, cooperating with people, managing conflict, influence, and effective communication skills. These different skills are utilized to elicit desired responses from others. Dr Rajat continuously influenced Akshita and his team for fostering excellence, which also showed his leadership qualities. His clear and empathetic communication helped build trust with Mr Pawan and facilitated effective learning for Akshita. These skills of Dr Rajat were highly instrumental in creating collaborative and positive environment, leading to quality patient care.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Emotional intelligence is crucial for healthcare professionals. However, implementing EI can be challenging due to various factors, including cultural differences where different cultures have varying expectations regarding emotions and communication. Other factors are heavy workloads and limited resources to prioritize EI trainings, emotional burnout with the constant exposure to patient sufferings, and lack of EI assessments and trainings.

To overcome these challenges and to enhance EI, healthcare settings can prioritize on-the-job EI trainings focusing upon competencies like empathy and teamwork, support strategies such as emotional connectedness through technology and mutual support.¹³ EI is linked to overall health and wellbeing, indicating

that its promotion in healthcare can lead to better outcomes for both providers and patients. In practice, promoting reflective exercises, team-based approaches, empathetic doctor–patient communication, and peer mentorship can enhance emotional resilience and collaboration. Reducing workload and fostering emotional awareness are critical for creating a compassionate, patient-centered healthcare system.

CONCLUSION

As healthcare environments are becoming more and more stressful with increasing demand, the role of EI is paramount. The scenario present in the study explained the multiple facets of EI in healthcare sector. EI helps in enhancing and creating robust bonds and relationships of doctors with their patients and of doctors with their team members. Effective communication, empathy, understanding one's own and others' emotions, motivation, managing stressful conditions, building relationships, all come under the one roof of "emotional intelligence."

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