



Empathy-Building Simulation Scenarios

Help frontline staff better understand the challenges and emotions of their patients

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RECOMMENDED FOR

Nurse managers and other clinical leaders

The importance of caregiver empathy

While nurse leaders have been long-standing champions of enhancing the patient experience, there is now widespread interest in the topic across the C-suite—largely driven by the decision to link hospital reimbursement to patient satisfaction performance.

Yet despite renewed investment in improving the patient experience, many institutions are struggling to achieve and sustain strong performance.

Patient experience often centers around frontline nurses. When caregivers have a full understanding of the patient experience, they have the knowledge they need to enhance that experience. They can:

- Better anticipate common sources of patient anxiety and take steps to mitigate them.
- Understand the importance of treating patients as unique individuals and take steps to treat their patients as not just conditions, but unique individuals with unique care needs and desires.
- Internalize the need to consistently approach all aspects of care with compassion and sincerity.

Our Empathy-Building Simulation Scenarios help caregivers better understand the challenges and emotions patients may experience while receiving care on the unit.

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About this tool

Overview

The goal of this exercise is to help frontline staff better understand the challenges and emotions patients may experience while receiving care in the hospital. This tool contains an interview guide, simulation scenarios, and a concluding group discussion to foster reflection.

Time required

Step	Approximate time allocation	Owner
Patient interview	5 to 10 minutes	Frontline nurse
Simulation selection	30 minutes	Manager/educator
Simulation completion and reflection questions	50 minutes	Frontline nurse
Facilitated discussion	45 minutes	Frontline nurse, manager/educator

How to use this tool

1. Select frontline staff members to complete this exercise. This exercise is applicable for all staff members.
2. Share the Patient Interview Guide (page 4) with participating staff members and agree upon a deadline for completion. We recommend setting a deadline of two to three weeks after sharing the exercise with participants. Establish regular check-ins across the exercise period to answer staff questions.
3. Complete the Simulation Selection (page 6).
4. Share Simulation Exercise and Discussion Preparation (page 9) with participating staff members and agree upon a deadline for completion. We recommend setting a deadline of two to three weeks after sharing the simulation with participants. Establish regular check-ins across the exercise period to answer staff questions.
5. After participants complete the patient interview and simulations, use the Discussion Guide (page 10) to lead a conversation with all participants about their experiences.

Patient interview guide

Step 1: Select a patient to interview

Select a patient for whom you are currently providing care and who is expected to remain on the unit for at least one more day. The patient should be alert, verbal, and strong enough to speak with you for a 10-minute interview.

Step 2: Request an interview

Using the scripting below as a guideline, ask the selected patient to participate in the interview.

Sample scenario:

Nurse: “Hi Mr. Jones. How are you doing today? Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

Mr. Jones: “Well, I’ve been better, but hanging in there. Sure, what can I help you with?”

Nurse: “I do everything I can to provide the best care to my patients, and I find that part of that is understanding what your experience at the hospital has been like so far. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about yourself about what being in the hospital has been like for you? Participating is totally optional, so please feel free to say no.”

Mr. Jones: “That would be fine. What will you do with the information?”

Nurse: “Good question. The information is completely confidential, and I will use it to help make your experience here even better.”

Mr. Jones: “Okay, I feel comfortable with that.”

Nurse: “Great—let’s get started.”

If the patient prefers to not be interviewed, use the scripting below as a guideline for your response. Then, approach a different patient to ask if he or she would like to participate.

Sample scenario:

Mr. Jones: “Sorry, but I’m really not feeling up to having a conversation right now.”

Nurse: “That’s no problem at all. I totally understand and hope that you can get some rest. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

Mr. Jones: “I could use some water. Thank you.”

Patient interview guide

Step 3: Conduct the interview

Use the following interview guide to learn more about your patient's experience in the hospital. Record your patient's responses in the blank spaces provided. Use the final blank space to record additional information you learn about your patient or use it to capture the answer to an additional question you would like to ask.

1. What has been most difficult about being in the hospital?

2. During this hospital stay, what has been your biggest source of anxiety?

3. How has being in the hospital impacted your friends and family?

4. During this hospital stay, which aspects of your care have been especially uncomfortable or painful?

5. In your experience so far, is there anything that you wish would have happened differently?

Use the space below to capture any additional information you have learned.

Simulation selection

Step 1: Identify common patient experiences.

Review the list of patient experiences below. If this list does not include experiences that are common to patients on your unit (based on your unique patient population), you may add other experiences in the blank spaces.

- Using a bedpan
- Experiencing pain
- Experiencing impaired vision (from conditions such as a cataract)
- Experiencing embarrassment
- Experiencing difficulty walking or with mobility
- Being awoken every four hours
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Step 2: Selection common patient experiences for staff to simulate.

Review the list above. Circle between one and five common patient experiences (including any experiences you added to the list) for which you would like staff to develop greater empathy.

Step 3: Map patient experience to corresponding simulations.

Add the experiences you circled in Step Two to the chart on the following page by writing them in the blank boxes in the left-hand chart column (labeled "Patient Experience").

For the patient experiences you added to the chart, brainstorm possible ways to simulate the experience and write the simulation instructions in the center column (labeled "Simulation").

Record the materials required for the simulations in the right-hand column (labeled "Required Materials").

Simulation selection

	Patient experience	Simulation	Required materials
<input type="checkbox"/>	Using a bedpan	Sit on a bedpan for 10 minutes	Bedpan
<input type="checkbox"/>	Experiencing pain	Placing your hand in ice water for two minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bucket • Ice cold water • Timer or stopwatch
<input type="checkbox"/>	Experiencing impaired vision	Wearing goggles smeared with Vaseline for five minutes while trying to locate an object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goggles • Vaseline
<input type="checkbox"/>	Experiencing embarrassment	Walking the halls in a hospital gown while pushing an IV pole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hospital gown • IV pole
<input type="checkbox"/>	Experiencing difficulty walking or with mobility	Navigating the halls in the wheelchair or walker	Walker or wheelchair
<input type="checkbox"/>	Being awoken every four hours	Setting an alarm every four hours during the night while sleeping	Alarm clock/stopwatch
<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>			

Simulation selection

Step 4: Select simulations.

Check the boxes of the experiences listed on the chart on page 7 that you want staff to simulate.

Step 5: Assign simulations to participants.

Review the checked experiences in the chart and decide how you will allocate them among unit staff. You may assign a single simulation to staff members or ask each staff member to simulate a different experience. You may also ask participants to complete more than one simulation (depending on available time).

Determine which simulations each participant will enact independently across a two-week period. Participants may complete the simulations on the unit or at home.

Step 6: Give simulation instructions to participants.

To formally assign a simulation to a participant, download/print (or photocopy) and complete the template on the following page for each participant.

To complete the template, fill in the blank spaces for the assigned simulation, materials required, and appropriate deadlines. When completing the template, refer to the table on page 7 to identify the required materials.

Step 7: Reserve a date and time for a facilitated discussion among participants.

Set a deadline for participants to complete the scenarios. After the deadline, schedule time for a 45-minute group discussion about participants' experiences with the simulation.

Simulation exercise and discussion preparation

Instructions

The goal of this exercise is to help you better understand the hospital experiences of your patients. One of the common experiences for patients on your unit is listed below.

Please simulate this experience by completing the instructions below. It will take roughly 20 minutes. Then complete the self-reflection questions. This will take roughly 30 minutes.

The patient experience that this exercise simulates is: _____

Before you begin, gather the following materials:

To simulate this experience, complete the following activity:

Other nurses on your unit will participate in similar situations. On _____, you will convene to discuss your respective experiences and what you learned. Bring this sheet with you to your scheduled discussion.

To prepare for the discussion, please answer the questions below.

1. How did the simulation make you feel?

2. Before you completed this simulation, how had you assumed your patients felt about this experience?

3. After completing this simulation, how do you think patients feel about this experience?

4. Will what you learned during the simulation change how you care for patients who experience something similar? How?

5. Please record any other thoughts or feelings about your simulation.

Discussion guide

Use the discussion guide below to initiate a discussion with staff on your unit about their patient interviews and assigned simulations.

Step 1: Use the following questions to lead a discussion about the patient interviews.

- What was it like to ask patients about their hospital experiences?
- What was the most important thing you learned?
- What surprised you most about your patient's responses?
- What do you think you can do to ensure patients have a more positive experience in the future?

Step 2: Transition the discussion from the patient interviews to the assigned simulations.

You can explain to the group, "Now that we've talked about what our patients said about their experiences, let's talk about what it was like to experience some of these issues firsthand."

Then, ask participants to share what simulation they were assigned.

Step 3: Use the following questions to lead a discussion about the assigned simulations.

- What did it feel like to simulate that experience?
- How did you think your patients coped with this experience before you underwent it personally? How has your thinking changed?
- How does having a greater understanding of these experiences impact your practice?
- Did you have any "a-ha" moments during the experience? What were they?
- Is there anything you will stop doing as a result of this experience?
- Is there anything you will start doing as a result of this experience?

Step 4: Wrap up the conversation using the following questions:

- Based on each of your simulation experiences, is there anything we can do to improve the overall patient experience on our unit?
- What steps should we take to improve this aspect of care?
- What metrics might we use to gauge success?

Staff evaluation guide

Use the evaluation criteria below to assess participants' exercises. For each criterion, check the box with the text that most closely describes the participants' work.

Check marks on the right-hand side of the spectrum may indicate a greater opportunity for improvement.

Simulation and discussion preparation

All responses demonstrate clear understanding of the connection between simulation and a typical patient experience

Majority of response demonstrate clear understanding of the connection between simulation and a typical patient experience

Responses demonstrate muddled understanding of the connection between simulation and a typical patient experience

Responses demonstrate no understanding of the connection between simulation and a typical patient experience

Discussion participation

Participant presents multiple, well-thought out ideas during discussion and articulates how the interview and simulation are related

Participant presents one or two concrete ideas during discussion and articulates how the interview and simulation are related

Participant demonstrates vague understanding of how the interview and simulation are related

Participant cannot articulate how the interview and simulation are related

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