

(as a representation of autonomic activity) and perceived empathy in dyadic interactions (Glucksman, 1981), a finding that was recently replicated at MGH (Marci & Riess, 2005).

Importantly, there is significant overlap between brain structures that control skin conductance fluctuations and structures implicated in empathy. A recent neuroimaging study demonstrated that females watching their significant other receive a shock activated the emotional component of a well-defined “pain matrix” even though the observers themselves did not receive a shock (Singer, 2004). The authors also reported a direct correlation between activity in the observers’ anterior cingulate cortex and self-reported level of empathic sensitivity. The anterior cingulate is known to play a role in skin conductance fluctuations, and these results support concordant activation of neurobiologically relevant areas of the brain during empathic moments (Critchley, 2003).

To become effective communicators of compassion and understanding, physicians must develop and maintain empathic skills. Currently, the amounts of medical information physicians need to review with their patients, the introduction of new technologies, multiple medication choices, and the pressures of managed care have all increased to an overwhelming degree. Together, these factors have generated an urgent need to optimize the limited time clinicians have with their patients. While many physicians begin their training with humanistic ideals, empathy is known to decrease by the end of the internship year, giving way to depression, anger, and fatigue (Bellini, Baime et al, 2002). In response, medical educators are calling for more emphasis on teaching the vital skills of empathy and communication with patients. Understanding the mechanism of psychotherapy and the role of empathy in it has the potential to illuminate and enhance this critical component of the patient-clinician relationship.

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If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.

Atticus Finch to his daughter
In Harper Lee's
To Kill a Mockingbird