

Experiential learning: The implementation of simulations in an interpersonal communications course with reference to staff and student training

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Abstract

Background: Interpersonal communication skills are essential to the patient-therapist relationship within the clinical setting, and forms the basis for patient compliance. Simulation is defined as an environment that replaces real-life situations with an artificially created guided experience, with the purpose of practicing new skills while applying prior knowledge.

Purpose: To describe the following: (a) incorporate simulations into an 'interpersonal communication' course for physical therapy students; and (b) train the staff to provide them with the required skills.

Participants: A total of 336 second year students who studied in 2015-2022 and six lecturers from the Department of Physical Therapy at Zefat Academic College.

Description of the process: The training of the teaching faculty and the simulation day took place at

the Center for Medical Simulation, Sheba Medical Center, Tel-Hashomer, Israel. Training of the staff included: 1) a refresher workshop in communication skills; 2) a workshop on writing case scenarios; and 3) a workshop on conducting video-based debriefing. The students participated in six videotaped simulations with "simulated patients" (SP). The scenarios included a communication challenge. The students had to apply communication skills to overcome the challenge and to advance the therapeutic situation. Following the simulations, the students participated in a video-based debriefing, during which the interactions with the simulated patients were analyzed and discussed. The debriefing included the provision of formative feedback and peer learning. This enabled the students to engage in self-reflection about the way they chose to cope with the situation, and how the experience could be applied to future cases. At the end of the simulation day, students filled out a feedback questionnaire, with included 12 statements evaluated by a 4-point Likert scale, and the option to describe how they experienced the simulation day using an open text format.

Results: A total of 299 students (89% response rate) filled out the questionnaire. Students reported that they felt the simulations were relevant to their studies, efficient, and promoted learning (a rating of 3.6-3.9). A total of 128 (34%) students added open text comments about the simulations' strong emotional impact.

Summary and conclusions: Dedicated and thorough training of the department's Teaching staff enabled the assimilation of simulations as part of the interpersonal communications course. The students reported that the simulations were relevant to their training process and enhanced their learning. Further research is needed to establish whether participation in simulation improves students' communication skills in their in their clinical work.

Keywords: education in physical therapy, communication skills, simulation, video-based debriefing, interpersonal communication