

# The Importance of Humanism in Patient Care During a Pandemic

By Olivia Wolfe, SPT

This year the world is feeling the heavy and sorrowful impacts of global instability as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaks havoc on our communities and throughout the world. Elderly loved ones may be in facilities alone, feeling scared and isolated, due to limited visitation.<sup>1</sup> Kids are being lost in the transition to online education due to technological and systemic inequalities.<sup>2</sup> Black and brown communities are facing an ongoing pandemic of systemic racism. This harsh reality causes them to be at greater risk for contracting COVID-19<sup>3,4</sup> as they are less likely to have access to healthcare and more likely to be in essential jobs, increasing their exposure and likelihood of poor health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> The world is grappling with changes in social structure and roadblocks to healthcare in ways we could have never imagined last year.

As a graduate student able to return home to my family while living through a pandemic, I recognize my privileged situation; and yet, during my four-month break from clinical rotations, I found myself overcome by anxiety and fear. I am a person who thrives with a busy, yet organized, schedule motivated by the promise of helping people in need. I began to feel lost in my seeming unimportance and sudden upheaval. I felt frustrated by my lack of responsibilities, anxious about

the health of my family members, fearful about my potential spreading of the virus, and angry about the gross inequities omnipresent in our society.

Yearning for academic engagement, I enrolled in an online course titled Humanism in Health and Healthcare.<sup>5</sup> The course aided in filling the void created by the absence of patient care by allowing me opportunities, through the completion of reflective assignments, to focus on strategies and purposes for implementing humanistic approaches in my clinical practice. Participation in this course helped alleviate my anxiety about the pandemic and allowed me to grow as a clinician.

## A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Taking this course amidst a pandemic granted me opportunities to think critically about how a humanistic approach is essential to driving positive behavior in a public health crisis. Using a humanistic approach promotes collective action among individuals who all have a unique interplay of emotional and personal factors affecting them. This focus on humanism encouraged me to reflect on the

lived experiences of individuals with COVID-19: those who have lost jobs, the elderly population at increased risk for contracting the virus,<sup>6,7</sup> and people of color who continue to experience inequality. My study of humanism in healthcare opened my eyes to the need for individual action and motivation to follow public health guidelines of social distancing and mask-wearing to protect at-risk communities and populations.

I sought to put this humanistic focus into practice by using my voice and privilege to uplift and support essential causes fighting the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism. One way to demonstrate this support is through being vigilant about performing a basic, yet significant task:- consistently wearing a face mask in public. Although a simple act, wearing a face mask is representative of much more than a preventive public health measure. A face mask symbolizes respect, empathy, fear, compassion, and humility. It protects oneself and one's neighbor, and given the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19, it is necessary to protect the lives of essential workers, immunocompromised individuals, and black, brown, and elderly people.

## HUMANISM IN THE CLINIC

Now that I have transitioned back into the clinic, I am striving to bring my sabbatical knowledge into my work with patients. Many of my patients are uneasy about being in a healthcare environment, given the inherent risk of COVID-19 transmission and isolation from loved ones. As a healthcare provider, I see that an important step in helping our patients heal is doing what we can to reduce their anxieties. In today's environment, this looks like taking appropriate precautions surrounding PPE and hygiene, as well as authentically engaging with our patients, in the hopes of distracting them from the overwhelming realities

beyond the treatment room. Engaging with patients in this way aids in establishing personal connections—something that is lacking in these times of social isolation. Now, whenever I work with a patient, I ask questions and tell jokes, seeking to understand aspects of their personal life through hearing their stories.

Taking a course focused on humanism in healthcare helped me prioritize the lived experiences of my patients over my fears and anxieties related to COVID-19. It also helped me recognize that my privilege extends beyond my living and financial situations to both my health and cultural background. I am young, I have no comorbidities, and when I leave the hospital at the end of the day, I return to a home with no elderly or immunocompromised family member to worry about infecting. As a white person in America, born into a well-educated family, growing up attending good schools and living in safe communities, I have not been directly impacted by systemic racism. I've learned from this course that I must use my understanding of personal privilege and humility to overcome personal anxieties and fears in order to better empathize with and listen to those who are suffering.

## PANDEMIC AS PREPARATION

Despite the uncertainties encountered along the way, navigating my graduate education and clinical rotations during a pandemic has provided me with invaluable preparation for my career as a physical therapist. Treating patients through a humanistic lens will allow me to do my best for each individual I encounter, and to be a part of necessary change in our healthcare system and in our country.

## References

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## About the Author



Olivia Wolfe, SPT is a third-year Doctor of Physical Therapy student at Emory University. She received her Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Vermont. After losing her good friend to a brain tumor at a young age, Olivia started a non-profit organization and youth triathlon to raise money for the Childhood Brain Tumor Foundation to increase funding and awareness for pediatric cancer research. It was through this experience that she observed the importance and need for compassion and humanism in the healthcare system and found a passion for a career in physical therapy. She strives to continue her learning and use her knowledge of humanistic practice to increase empathetic and quality care while working as a physical therapist with Veterans Affairs to treat our nation's Veterans.