

Caregiver's Empathy and Recovery of Patients with Chronic Illness in Ekiti State Teaching Hospital, Nigeria

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Abstract

Chronic illnesses pose significant challenges to patients, affecting their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Caregivers who possess empathy can provide a supportive and understanding environment that positively influences patient outcomes. However, there is a need for further research to explore and understand the specific impact of caregiver empathy on patient recovery in the Nigerian milieu. This study assessed the impact of caregivers' empathy on the recovery of patients with chronic illness in Ekiti State Teaching Hospital. The study applied a descriptive research design. Qualitative data were collected from 50 respondents that were purposively selected for interview sessions. The respondents were caregivers and patients with chronic illness at Ekiti State Teaching Hospital. The findings from the study revealed that caregiver empathy is very significant in patient well-being it offered emotional support, reducing loneliness, and positively impacting physical health outcomes. Patients value caregiver empathy for emotional support, contributing to their sense of well-being and reducing feelings of isolation. Also, empathetic caregivers motivate patients to adhere to treatment plans, fostering active participation in care. Patients with empathetic caregivers exhibit improved treatment adherence, reduced stress, and enhanced overall recovery. Conversely, a lack of caregiver empathy leads to negative consequences such as heightened anxiety and feelings of isolation. Following from the findings, the study recommends that healthcare institutions should be encouraged to adopt and promote patient-centred care approaches, emphasizing the emotional aspects of caregiving beyond professional duties.

Keywords: Caregiver, empathy, chronic illness, patient's recovery, treatment

1. Background

Chronic illnesses often involve conditions that require long-term management; hence they pose significant challenges to patient (WHO 2024; Nidhi & Basavareddy, 2020). The illnesses affect patient physical, emotional, and social wellbeing (WHO 2024). The support provided by caregivers in the event of a chronic illness plays a crucial role in the recovery process just as caregivers who possess empathy can provide a supportive and understanding environment that positively influences patients' outcomes (Wang, Wang, Sheng & Chen, 2022). Hence, understanding the impact of caregiver empathy on patient recovery path is crucial for improving the quality of care provided to individuals with chronic illnesses.

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Merriam-Webster dictionary defines empathy as the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another. The key issues in empathy or empathetic caregiving are understanding, sharing feelings, emotional intelligence, social interactions and compassion. Empathy is an important aspect of caregiving that can greatly influence patient recovery. Patients with chronic illnesses often experience emotional distress, such as depression, anxiety, helplessness and feelings of isolation (Wang, Wang, Sheng & Chen, 2022). Empathetic Caregivers can provide needed support that promotes psycho-emotional wellness and coping mechanisms for patients with chronic illness (Riess, 2015).

Studies have shown that empathetic caregiving can positively influence physical health outcomes (Wang, Li, Cui, Tu, Deng, Yang, & Wang, 2023; Nidhi & Basavareddy, 2020). Patients who receive empathetic care may experience reduced pain levels, improved symptom management, and enhanced overall physical well-being. Caregivers who exhibit empathy can also address the social needs of patients with chronic illnesses (Leloirain, Brédart, Dolbeault, & Sultan. 2012).

The impact of caregiver empathy on the recovery of patients with chronic illness in Nigeria is a significant area of research that deserves attention. This study examined the impact of caregiver empathy on the recovery of patients with chronic illness, underlining the importance of empathy in improving patient outcomes and well-being among patients and caregivers in Ekiti State Teaching Hospital, Nigeria.

2. Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Assess the extent to which the presence of caregiver empathy contributes to the recovery of patients with chronic illness.
2. Identify how patients perceive the impact of caregiver empathy on their recovery from chronic illness
3. Examine factors that influence the level of empathy displayed by caregivers on the recovery of patients with chronic illness

3. Theoretical Orientation

Social Support Theory of Cohen (1985) forms the theoretical framework of the study. The theory posits that social relationships and the support received from such relationships can impart on an individual's well-being, health and ability to cope with stressors. Fundamentally, the theory accentuates the importance of social relationships and support in helping people cope with stress, promote their physical, psychological and mental well-being and improve overall health outcomes. Therefore, in relation to the study, social support theory underscores the significance of the patient-caregiver relationship for individuals managing chronic diseases.

4. Methodology

The study applied a qualitative research design. The study population comprises caregivers and patients at Ekiti State Teaching Hospital. Purposive sampling method was used to select 50 respondents for In-depth Interview session. The respondents consist of caregivers providing care for patients with chronic illness and patients managing chronic ailments at the hospital. The instrument for data collection was a semi-structured questionnaire. The researcher took note and also recorded responses. Data were transcribed and thematically

analysed in line with the objectives of the study.

5. Presentation Of Results

Extent to which Presence of Caregiver Empathy Contributes to Recovery of Patients.

The responses of the interviewees indicated that caregiver empathy plays a key role in the recovery and well-being of patients with chronic illnesses. Although the specific impact may vary depending on individual circumstances, the result from the data depicted that empathetic caregiving can have several positive effects on patients. A female interviewee reported that;

Empathy is when you feel or share someone else pain. In my few years of experience as a health worker, I have seen and experienced how empathy really impacted many patients' life in one way or the other; it's usually a gradual process that influences them positively. Though they (patients) might not still survive after all, but the little time they spent, they spent it free from depression, they are able to give a trial in living, because they see that they are loved, and cared for. Some others survive and have a few more years to go. Empathy has helped them to do away with depressive thought, and helped them to endure the pain (Formal female Caregiver).

Another Interviewee opined that:

Caregiver empathy is very essential in the overall recovery process for patients with chronic illness. The patient that has been down with chronic diseases is naturally depressed already. By giving patients with these illness attention, words of encouragement, counselling, spiritual talks, experience of any survivor, and also playing with them, will give them reassurance of hope, and also gradually drag them out of their depress state. Also they will begin to see themselves as important and a happy person. Also this will help the health workers to discharge their duties, when they are given medications, they (patients) takes them without any delay, because they see the caregiver feels up and share their pain. Caregiver's empathy is very significant, because naturally your psychotherapy, you talking to them, giving them your attention will help them in recovering from the illness in time (Formal female Caregiver).

Similarly, another Interviewee said:

Every aspects of caregiver empathy is essential as they all work together, but to me encouragement is an aspect that I feel is very specific in the caregiver empathy, because this will help the patient to see more reason to stay out of the depress state, and also to enjoy the rest of the days left (Informal female caregiver).

There was indeed a general consensus among interviewees regarding the extent to which the presence of caregiver empathy contributes to the recovery of patients with chronic illness. They noted that empathy from caregivers provides emotional support, helping patients cope with the psychological challenges associated with chronic illnesses. It was observed that the understanding and validation of their emotions can contribute to reduced stress and anxiety levels. Patients tend to be more satisfied with their care when they perceive their caregivers as empathetic. A positive caregiver-patient relationship can lead to increased trust, cooperation, and adherence to treatment plans.

Caregiver empathy can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation (usually associated with chronic illness as a result physical limitations or stigma) by providing companionship and understanding. Caregivers demonstration of empathy can help patients understand the importance of adhering to their prescribed treatments and medications. By providing emotional support and actively involving patients in decision-making, empathetic caregivers

can motivate patients to follow their treatment plans more effectively. Patients who receive empathetic care may experience reduced pain levels, improved symptom management, and enhanced overall physical well-being. Nevertheless, caregivers differ in their ability to express empathy; while patients may have different preferences regarding the level and type of emotional support they find most helpful. These pose different challenges. The following are excerpts from the interview sessions:

Most of those chronic ill patients are depressed, and you want to care for them, by talking to them, giving them reassurance, as some of them have practically lost hope. However, we face some challenges or limitations. For instance, differences in religious inclination and spiritual beliefs of the patients and caregiver. Jesus is the source of hope and strength for me as a Christian. This is offensive to the patient who is a Muslim (Formal Female Caregiver).

If the caregiver and the patient don't share the same language, there will be problem in the caregiver carrying out their role, because they wouldn't understand each other. For example, you speak in English as the caregiver, and the patient hears only Hausa. The state of mind of the patients is another one. Some patient has practically lost it all, there's no amount of talks you want to give them that they will hear. They have lost their self-esteem, self-actualization, focus, goals, they have lost everything, what they are anticipating for is just death. Consequently, all empathetic skills or effort avail nothing. (Formal Female Caregiver).

Many of the patients' relatives are aggressive. They behave as if it's the caregiver that is responsible for the illness. This behaviour can be overwhelming. (Formal Female Caregiver).

How Patients Perceive the Impact of Caregiver Empathy on their Recovery from Chronic Illness.

Most of the patients value caregiver empathy for the emotional support it provides. Feeling understood, heard, and validated in their emotions contributes to a sense of well-being. Patients may be more motivated to adhere to treatment plans and recommendations when they perceive empathy from their caregivers. The understanding and encouragement provided by empathetic caregivers can inspire patients to actively participate in their own care, including medication adherence, lifestyle changes, and rehabilitation efforts. An interviewee who shared her personal experiences regarding how caregiver empathy has influenced her recovery journey reported that:

The impact of caregivers both the formal and the informal cannot be overemphasized, they have all played a huge role in my recovery journey. God had used them all so much for me. Let me talk first on the formal caregivers in this hospital, they are very jovial, devoted, so caring, and they discharge their duties so well, they do this work with sincerity, they are such a wonderful health personnel. They usually give help to the patient, I as a testimony, even in my hopeless situation, they still give me assurance, they make emphasis that God is in charge of it all. I so much appreciate them, they are wonderful people. Also the informal ones, they are good. Relatives and non -relatives, they have played a wonderful role in my life both in cash and kind, their prayers, spiritual talks and all, visitations. My husband here has been a darling, he is always here with me most times. And this has been of great help in my recovery. God has used them so much for me. I'm so grateful. That's why I said earlier that their impact cannot be overemphasized. And I'm using this medium to pray for them that God Almighty will reward them (A female patient).

Another interviewee who described her experience as to specific moments or actions by

caregivers that stand out for her as particularly impactful in terms of empathy and her recovery said:

Being a chronically ill patient, my journey in the hospital has been filled with various experiences, both challenging and uplifting. Throughout this time, there have indeed been moments and actions by caregivers that have left a lasting impact on me in terms of empathy and my recovery. One of the most impactful aspects has been the genuine concern and empathy shown by certain caregivers. It goes beyond the routine tasks of administering medications or checking vitals. It was the moment when a nurse took the time to sit down and truly listen to my concerns, fears, or even just how my day has been. In those instances, I felt like more than just a patient; I felt seen and heard. Another significant one is the caregivers' ability to communicate effectively and transparently. It can be frightening to navigate through the complexities of a chronic condition, and having caregivers who take the time to explain procedures, treatment plans, and potential outcomes in simple terms is very comforting. It helps me feel more in control of my situation, giving me a sense of empowerment that positively influences my mind-set towards recovery. (A female patient).

Another Interviewee submitted as follows:

The psychological and emotional support is very important because it helps me out of my depressed state, I began to feel alive, and also I yielded to take the medications and all treatments, because I saw a reason to live and that I could survive. Both the formal and informal caregivers have rendered their psychological and emotional support to me and this has been a great help to my recovery process (A male patient).

Patients often perceive empathy as a critical element that extends beyond medical expertise, influencing their emotional well-being and overall journey toward healing. Empathy creates a supportive environment where patients feel understood, valued, and more connected to their caregivers. When healthcare providers demonstrate genuine concern and take the time to listen to a patient's concerns, fears, and experiences, it fosters a sense of trust and cooperation. This emotional connection can positively influence a patient's mental state, reducing stress and anxiety, which are often prevalent in chronic illness.

On the contrary, when there is lack of caregiver empathy, the impact on the patient's recovery experience can have grave consequences. The following are some of the submissions.

Yes, there have been situations during my hospital stays where the absence or lack of caregiver empathy had a noticeable negative impact on my recovery experience. In those moments, when caregivers seemed distant or rushed, I felt a sense of isolation and frustration. It's challenging to cope with a chronic illness, and empathy from caregivers is vital to maintaining a positive outlook. When caregivers showed impatience or a lack of understanding, it made me hesitant to communicate my needs and concerns. I felt dismissed and overlooked which heightened my anxiety and diminished my confidence in the provided care. This emotional strain, coupled with the physical challenges of my condition, hindered my overall well-being. (A female patient).

Yes, I've unfortunately experienced situations in the hospital where the absence or lack of caregiver empathy impacted on my recovery. Remember earlier I spoke about how my husband and the nurses have been supportive and that God will bless them because before my husband came, there were moments when I felt like just another medical case rather than a person dealing with the challenges of chronic illness. Encounters with caregivers who didn't take the time to explain procedures or compassionately address my concerns heightened my feelings of vulnerability. It made me hesitant to communicate openly about my symptoms or ask questions, as I feared being met with impatience or indifference. I was

thinking they hated me. When caregivers are empathetic, it not only positively impacts my emotional well-being but also contributes to a more supportive and conducive environment for recovery (A Female patient).

Patients often perceive caregiver empathy as a significant factor in their recovery process. While medical expertise and effective treatments are crucial, the human connection formed through empathy plays a significant role in the overall healing experience. In line with (Decety, & Fotopoulou, 2015; Riess, 2015), empathy in caregiving for patients with chronic illnesses helps in different ways; Patients with chronic illnesses often experience emotional distress, such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. Caregivers who demonstrate empathy can provide emotional support, offering comfort, reassurance, and a sense of connection. This emotional support can contribute to improved psychological well-being and coping mechanisms for patients.

Factors that Influence the Level of Empathy Displayed by Caregivers.

Several factors can influence the level of empathy displayed by caregivers, More often than not caregivers face demanding schedules and hectic workloads, which can limit the time available for individual patient interactions. High levels of stress and burnout may also affect caregivers' capacity to display empathy consistently. Moreover, the personal characteristics and experiences of caregivers play a crucial role in their ability to empathize with patients. Empathy is a complex trait that involves understanding and sharing the feelings of others, and certain qualities and experiences can enhance a caregiver's capacity for empathy. Some individuals naturally possess a high degree of empathy as part of their personality. Some of the excerpts that emerged from the session include:

There are a lot of barriers we face as a caregiver. We face challenges from the relatives and also from the patients themselves. Let me start from the patient. When we get to the bedside to serve their medications, you will notice that patient might just flare up that he/she doesn't want to take it. Such impulsive anger do sometimes result from financial strain and stress in meeting the hospital bills. At some other times, it could from loss of the hope of recovery. On the other hand, some relatives would say they don't want to leave their people alone in the hospital, but in the process they become aggressive towards us. Indeed, there is a lot, that I can't tell it all (A female formal caregiver).

The caregiver- patient relationship is a big influence on the level of empathy demonstrated by caregivers; this varies base on the kind of relationship the caregiver and patients has. Those who share a bond together, the case of lovers e.g husband- to- wife, partner to be, tends to demonstrate more of empathy than those who doesn't. Using myself as an example, I'm always here with my wife because I love her and we share bonds together, unlike friends and colleagues that just come, few minutes they are gone, they can't feel enough the pain unlike I who knows what we both shares together. So, the kind of relationship one has with the patient will influence the level of empathy rendered by caregivers (A male informal caregiver).

In my own perspective, one of the factors that contribute to caregivers displaying a high level of empathy to a chronic illness is your emotion. It is not just having money, but a heart of care is germane. Another one I can say is environmental or background influence. You cannot blame some people though, they are not just brought up in a way of showing empathy to people base on where they have live before or family that raised them (A female formal caregiver).

I believe that a caregiver should be patience enough, in order to relate well with patients

because they are so down and depressed about their situation, it's will definitely take time before they can draw out from that low state. Also compassion is an essential characteristics for a caregiver to be able to have enough empathy (A female informal caregiver). Individual traits such as compassion and emotional intelligence is important for caregivers. As a formal caregiver, when you are dealing with patient, one should treat them equally, no matter the relationship the caregivers have with the patients. One thing is that no matter the hierarchy or level of relationship, there's need of empathizing with all the patients in the same way (A male informal caregiver).

6. Discussion Of Findings

The study revealed that the presence of caregiver empathy contributes to the recovery of patients with chronic illness to a great extent. The finding sheds light on the vital role caregiver empathy plays in the recovery of patients with chronic illnesses. The responses consistently highlighted the positive impact of empathetic caregiving on various aspects of patient well-being. The finding corroborate the submissions of Berkman, Sheridan, & Donahue, (2011) and Atal, & Cheng, (2016) which found that empathetic caregiving can positively influence physical health outcomes. Moreover, the finding is consistent with Social support theory that social relationships play a crucial role in promoting health and overall well-being of individuals.

Further, the study found that positive perception of caregivers' empathy by patients impacts significantly on patients recovery from chronic illness. The finding compares favourably with the findings work Nidhi & Basavareddy (2020).

Lastly, finding from the study showed that caregivers face challenges from patients themselves, including resistance to medication, financial constraints, and emotional stress. Patients may express anger or frustration, impacting the caregiver-patient relationship. In addition caregivers who share a personal bond with patients are more likely exhibit higher levels of empathy compared to those with more distant relationships. These findings are in consonant studies of Epstein, Amin, Reuter, & Humphrey, 2017) that underscore the significance of a strong patient-caregiver relationship in enhancing empathetic communication.

7. Conclusion

The study examined the influence of caregiver's empathy on the recovery of patients with Chronic Illness. It accentuates the vital role of caregiver's empathy in moulding the recovery passage of patients with chronic illnesses. Empathetic caregiving positively influences emotional, mental, and physical well-being, contributing to better patient outcomes. The findings underscore the significance of a strong caregiver-patient relationship, emphasizing the need for emotional support, understanding, and effective communication. The study ultimately points towards the importance of a comprehensive, patient-centred strategy in chronic illness health care delivery.

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