



What Doctors Feel: How Emotions Affect the Practice of Medicine

By Danielle Ofri

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A look at the emotional side of medicine—the shame, fear, anger, anxiety, empathy, and even love that affect patient care

Physicians are assumed to be objective, rational beings, easily able to detach as they guide patients and families through some of life's most challenging moments. But doctors' emotional responses to the life-and-death dramas of everyday practice have a profound impact on medical care. And while much has been written about the minds and methods of the medical professionals who save our lives, precious little has been said about their emotions. In *What Doctors Feel*, Dr. Danielle Ofri has taken on the task of dissecting the hidden emotional responses of doctors, and how these directly influence patients.

How do the stresses of medical life—from paperwork to grueling hours to lawsuits to facing death—affect the medical care that doctors can offer their patients? Digging deep into the lives of doctors, Ofri examines the daunting range of emotions—shame, anger, empathy, frustration, hope, pride, occasionally despair, and sometimes even love—that permeate the contemporary doctor-patient connection. Drawing on scientific studies, including some surprising research, Dr. Danielle Ofri offers up an unflinching look at the impact of emotions on health care.

With her renowned eye for dramatic detail, Dr. Ofri takes us into the swirling heart of patient care, telling stories of caregivers caught up and occasionally torn down by the whirlwind life of doctoring. She admits to the humiliation of an error that nearly killed one of her patients and her forever fear of making another. She mourns when a beloved patient is denied a heart transplant. She tells the riveting stories of an intern traumatized when she is forced to let a newborn die in her arms, and of a doctor whose daily glass of wine to handle the frustrations of the ER escalates into a destructive addiction. But doctors don't only feel fear, grief, and frustration. Ofri also reveals that doctors tell bad jokes about "toxic sock syndrome," cope through gallows humor, find hope in impossible situations, and surrender to ecstatic happiness when they triumph over illness. The stories

here reveal the undeniable truth that emotions have a distinct effect on how doctors care for their patients. For both clinicians and patients, understanding what doctors feel can make all the difference in giving and getting the best medical care.

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Editorial Review

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Starred Review Tucked inside a white lab coat or scrub suit is a welter of human emotions that can play a large role in a doctor's decision-making process. Ofri, an internist at New York's Bellevue Hospital, explores the emotional core of doctoring. Suturing together her own experiences, the plights of memorable patients, and interviews with other physicians, she examines the diverse feelings—anger, grief, shame, disillusionment, gratitude, humility, joy—that can fluster or elevate physicians. “Fear is a primal emotion in medicine,” she writes, and doctors worry about making a mistake or even killing a patient. Sadness is an occupational hazard, and “A thread of sorrow weaves through the daily life of medicine.” Then there's empathy. Is it innate, acquired, or both, and why do third-year medical students lose it? Ofri exposes her emotional side as she recounts the story of a longtime patient, an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala who finally receives a heart transplant but dies shortly after the procedure. Ofri admits, “Doctors who are angry, nervous, jealous, burned out, terrified, or ashamed can usually still treat bronchitis or ankle sprains competently.” Yet her insightful and invigorating book makes the case that it's better for patients if a physician's emotional compass-needle points in a positive direction. --Tony Miksanek

Review

“Taut, vivid prose. . . . She writes for a lay audience with a practiced hand.” —*New York Times*

"Here is a book that is at once sad and joyful, frightening and thought-provoking. In her lucid and passionate explanations of the important role that emotions play in the practice of medicine and in healing and health, Danielle Ofri tells stories of great importance to both doctors and patients.” —Perri Klass, author of *Treatment Kind and Fair: Letters to a Young Doctor*

“An invaluable guide for doctors and patients on how to ‘recognize and navigate the emotional subtexts’ of the doctor-patient relationship.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Yet her insightful and invigorating book makes the case that it's better for patients if a physician's emotional compass-needle points in a positive direction.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“Rich and deeply insightful. . . . A fascinating journey into the heart and mind of a physician struggling to do the best for her patients while navigating an imperfect health care system.” —*Boston Globe*

“With grace, courage, humility, and compassion, Bellevue Hospital physician Ofri gives voice and color to the heartbreak, stress, and joy that attends medical practice.” —*Library Journal*

“A fabulous read.” —*Greater Good*

"Dr. Ofri's book is essential reading in Medical Humanities. She traces her own experiences with patients from all backgrounds, and uses clinical vignettes to confess her own feelings--disgust, fear, shame, gratitude, joy. She weaves together personal anecdotes and medical learning in a compelling account of her medical decisions and reflections. Highly recommended."—Sara van den Berg, Professor of English and Medical Humanities, Saint Louis University

"I have been a family physician for almost 50 years, and despite all those years of medicine, I was in tears

about half the time while I read *What Doctors Feel*. I have recommended that every AHMA member read it."—Bill Manahan, Executive Director at Minnesota Holistic Medicine Group

"Dr. Ofri's anecdotal writing style makes this book a perfect accompaniment for the academic setting. Her real-life experiences can be incorporated into a variety of health science curricula bringing course theory together with practical application. As a result, her readers critical gain insight regarding why applying theory in the practice of medicine requires empathy for the physicians and proactive cooperation amongst colleagues."—Christine Whittrock, Associate Professor of Instruction in Regulatory Affairs, Temple University

"I describe patients to my students and ask them to role play either the doctor or the patient. I see a difference in their responses after they have read *What Doctors Feel*. They are more studied in their answers. Part of medical education now is not only core competencies from a factual standpoint but also a social standpoint. Dr. Ofri has a way of communicating those lessons in a clear a cogent and very personal fashion."—Beth Dollinger M.D. Arnot Ogden Medical Center

"*What Doctors Feel* is the perfect book for my research and teaching on the subject of lack of empathy in medical school students."—James Asa Shield, Jr., MD, Professor, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry, Virginia Commonwealth University

About the Author

Danielle Ofri, MD, PhD, is an associate professor of medicine at the New York University School of Medicine and has cared for patients at New York's Bellevue Hospital for more than two decades. Writing in the *Guardian*, Andrew Solomon singled out Ofri as the only woman among an extraordinary new generation of doctor writers, saying, "Ofri has produced four impressive books and numerous articles, all striking for their reversion to empathy, their willingness to sense not only the physical life of a patient, but also the emotional." Ofri's books and articles have become academic staples in medical schools, universities and residency programs. She is the editor in chief of the *Bellevue Literary Review* and writes regularly for the *New York Times*. Ofri in New York City.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

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Elinor Russell:

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Ann Cason:

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