

What is emotional intelligence at work?

Abstract

Over the past decade, emotional intelligence has been a popular topic of research and debate in the business psychology literature. Emotional intelligence is concerned with an individual's capacity to recognise emotions (their own and those of others) and to understand and regulate emotions across social situations. Interventions designed to develop skills associated with emotional intelligence can be beneficial in understanding and improving areas of job performance; thereby helping individuals to develop confidence and competence to deal with emotionally charged situations. This article presents an overview of academic models of emotional intelligence, followed by discussion of its relevance to GPs. A case study shows how emotional intelligence has been used to develop feedback skills in Home Office employees, and the authors comment on how GPs could develop their emotional intelligence to benefit themselves, their patients and the wider practice team.

Keywords

emotional intelligence – self-awareness – managing emotions – empathy – development

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Box 1. The central concepts of emotional intelligence.

- Emotional intelligence (EI) is concerned with one's own emotions and those of other people.
- The concept of self-awareness (understanding and managing yourself and your emotions) is integral to EI.
- Part of EI is about interpersonal awareness (understanding others) and as such EI is linked to empathy.
- Individuals differ in their level of EI.
- EI can be conceptualised as an ability or as a personality trait.
- There is mixed evidence as to whether individuals can develop their level of EI. However, at the very least, individuals can develop strategies to make them more effective in situations requiring an understanding of one's own or other's emotions.

"IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other sources" (Goleman 1995¹)

Like us, you may have read the claim above and been intrigued; what are these 'other sources' which can help us achieve 'life success' and how can we capitalise on them? Whether it is accurate or not this quote is one of the most common claims surrounding the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), and one which has sparked a flurry of interest in the business world regarding the definition of EI and how it might be beneficial in the workplace. This article offers an introduction to EI and some insights into its relevance to GPs. A case study demonstrates how emotional intelligence has been used to develop feedback skills in Home Office employees, and we end with an overview of how EI can be developed in your practice to benefit you, your patients and the wider practice team.

What is EI?

From as early as 1920, psychologists have theorised that people's ability to understand and manage others is a distinct intellectual capacity that is separate from general intelligence. Although Thorndike's original social intelligence theory from those early days² is now known to be flawed, it certainly offers intuitive appeal with potential for considerable practical application. This perhaps explains why reiterations of his theory, such as EI, continue to be popular and create interest amongst researchers and practitioners alike.

In 1995 Goleman positioned EI as a set of social competencies. In 1997 Salovey and Mayer³ defined the concept of EI in terms of 'emotional experiencing' – how people perceive their own and other's emotions and in turn express their own emotions and 'emotional reasoning' – how people understand their own and others' emotions and reflect and regulate their own emotions. In the same year Bar-On defined EI as 'skills which influence one's ability to succeed'.⁴ Across the range of definitions are elements that are central to the concept of EI (Box 1).

Case study: Using emotional intelligence to develop feedback skills

The Home Office runs an internal development scheme to help scheme members achieve middle management positions in approximately 3 years. The scheme leaders identify group-level development needs and translate ideas from the psychological literature into interactive workshops. In this example, scheme members had identified the need to develop their skills in giving and receiving feedback, and also to increase their understanding and management of their actions during this process. Consequently emotional intelligence (EI) was identified as a useful framework for the workshop. To maximise delegates' learning, the workshop was divided into stages (see below right).

Step 1. Delegates complete the EI questionnaire

On this occasion we selected the Emotions and Behaviours at Work²¹ (EBW) questionnaire which uses a work-based model to help individuals understand why people behave as they do and how to maximise their performance at work. We initially worked in partnership with the test provider to develop the day 1 and 2 workshops. Prior to the workshops, delegates completed the EBW.

Step 2. Day 1 – introducing EI

We knew that delegates wanted to develop their feedback skills. Therefore day 1 included an introduction to the concept of EI and a number of discussion exercises to raise self-awareness of delegate's typical feedback style and the impact that this has on themselves and others. For example, delegates were encouraged to reflect on instances where they had given difficult feedback and the impact their emotions (and subsequent behaviour) had had on themselves and the person receiving the feedback.

Step 3. Individual feedback

Once delegates had an understanding of EI and how it could be used to facilitate giving appropriate feedback, they received a one-to-one feedback session of their questionnaire results from a trained facilitator. This session helped raise delegates' self-awareness of their preferences at work, how their approach may influence others in the workplace, as well as providing an opportunity for the facilitator to role-model effective feedback.

Step 4. Day 2 – practical exercises

Day 2 of the workshop built on the previous stages by combining the delegates' knowledge of EI with exercises to practise giving and receiving feedback using a variety of strategies. Most importantly, day 2 gave delegates the opportunity to practise the interpersonal skills associated with EI; identifying emotional responses in others and tailoring their

communication/ feedback to successfully manage the interaction.

Step 5. Follow-up and additional workshops

A key success factor for any training is the transfer of skills to the workplace. To facilitate this, delegates were encouraged to complete 'EI maps' which prompted them to consider the exercises they completed, the feedback from their peers and the facilitators, as well as learning points they could apply in their day-to-day roles.

Step 6. Further integration of EI principles

The EI workshops are just one opportunity available to members of the development scheme. Additional workshops include innovation and decision-making, at which delegates are encouraged to reflect on some of the basic principles of EI such as self-awareness of personal style and social awareness of how others behave, to enhance their understanding of how they and others typically approach such activities.

The stages of the emotional intelligence intervention



The psychological literature contains many ambitious claims regarding the benefits of EI to individuals and organisations, including that developing EI can help people to become better leaders,⁵ competent decision-makers,⁶ profitable salespeople⁷ and even successful debt-collectors!⁸ However a critical review of the evidence suggests that well-designed and tailored EI interventions can be beneficial to some aspects of job performance; developing confidence and competence to deal with emotionally charged situations.

Why is EI of interest to GPs?

There are many reasons why EI should be of interest to the medical community. Researchers have suggested

that situations where EI has the strongest relationship with job performance are those with high frequency, high severity and high duration of exposure to emotionally charged situations⁹ – descriptors which could readily be applied to a GP surgery.

Furthermore the ability to interpret a patient's emotional state and to display an appropriate response is likely to be key in establishing and maintaining effective doctor–patient relationships,¹⁰ in turn leading to more accurate diagnosis, increased compliance with prescribed treatment and higher patient satisfaction levels.¹¹ Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that some researchers suggest that individuals with high levels of EI should be recruited into medicine and these attributes nurtured through training.^{12,13}

A shift from the traditional approach, in which doctors were encouraged to distance themselves from emotions to ensure objectivity,¹⁴ is evident. Regulatory bodies such as the General Medical Council¹⁵ and the Association of American Medical Colleges¹⁶ encourage the development of skills and abilities associated with EI, including empathy, altruism, communication skills, coping with uncertainty, and teamwork. Furthermore, NHS Careers identifies key personal qualities for a GP which include the 'ability to care about patients and their relatives' and the 'awareness of ones own limitations'.¹⁷ In addition to these recommendations, since its introduction the national competency-based selection system for entry to GP training¹⁸ has included assessments of 'Empathy & Sensitivity' and 'Communication Skills'.

As well as the potential benefits for patient care, a better understanding of one's own emotions and their impact on others can also lead to more positive interactions with colleagues, thus increasing capacity for effective partnership-working. Additionally, increased self-awareness can facilitate personal reflection on performance and learning. The NHS Medical Leadership Competency Framework¹⁹ not only highlights the importance of skills related to interpersonal EI through its 'Working With Others' competency, but also some of the intrapersonal components through the inclusion of 'self-awareness' and 'self-management' within its 'Personal Qualities' section.

Putting EI theory into practice

So how can you develop your EI to benefit you both as a GP and as a member of your practice team? The case study describes a Home Office programme for junior managers in which we discussed how EI could be used to increase self-awareness and to develop skills in providing appropriate feedback.

GPs can similarly enhance their EI skills. For example, self-awareness can be developed by:

- Identifying typical situations where EI skills are important in your role (e.g. working with difficult patients or patients from a different background to you, resolving conflict or making tough decisions). How do you tend to feel and behave in these situations?
- Taking time to review how you approached a challenging situation, ask yourself how you felt during this situation and the impact this had on your behaviour. Is there anything which you could do differently?
- Asking colleagues for feedback on your approach and comparing this to your own evaluation of the situation.

Interpersonal awareness can be developed by:

- Thinking about situations where others you work with have appeared to be in a challenging or emotionally charged situation: how did you identify this and how did you respond?
- Asking patients or colleagues for feedback on your actions and how this made them feel. How are your intentions translated to others? Do you need to adapt your behaviour?

In addition to these individual reflections and activities, facilitated group or one-to-one sessions can also be beneficial, particularly as a starting point for focusing personal development. For example, completing and receiving feedback on an EI questionnaire can help you understand your typical approach and level of skill whilst also providing a framework for further reflection and development planning.

Where is EI useful in a medical context?

The NHS Leadership Competency Framework clearly emphasises the importance of EI-type skills throughout the career cycle of a doctor, from undergraduate to postspecialist certification. At selection for entry to GP training, some required competencies already overlap with the concept of EI (such as Empathy and Communication Skills).

In terms of personal development activities, developing a better understanding of EI appears to have clear links to the leadership competency areas of 'Self-awareness' and 'Building and Maintaining Relationships'. For example, exercises where participants work with peers or patients and receive feedback on their approach could be effective in both improving how the individual manages those relationships, and also increasing their understanding of how they might be perceived by others.

Similarly, opportunities which support and encourage reflection on significant real events, be they challenging meetings within the practice or with other stakeholders, can help an individual to understand and critically evaluate the effectiveness of their approach in such situations. The insight gained from such activities can also help focus future development activities to target specific areas or use methods most appropriate for an individual's preferred learning style.

An increased understanding of EI might also be of interest and of use to those involved with medical education. Understanding how others behave and react to feedback is useful in thinking about how to approach such dialogues, ensuring that the end result is recipients who feel motivated to listen to feedback and change as a result. In this sense it is clear to see why some (e.g. McMullen 2003²⁰) suggest that, in order for students to

be trained effectively, medical educators first need to develop their own EI skills!

Summary

EI is still a relatively new area in terms of psychological research, with differing opinions amongst experts and academics. Whilst it is important not to get carried away with concepts which have not yet been fully validated, there is sufficient overlap with other concepts which are well researched (such as empathy), plus emerging EI research evidence and organisational case studies, to be confident that there are practical benefits in using the concept of EI at work. Not least, an awareness of EI should encourage us to take the time to reflect upon how we manage our emotions and behaviour and the impact this has on those around us. ■

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Practical points

- **EI skills can be developed. As well as the ability to read a situation, they also include understanding your typical approach to situations, being motivated to adapt your style as necessary and feeling confident to deal with emotionally charged situations.**
- **Developing EI-related skills can lead to enhanced work performance as perceived by patients, clients and colleagues. It also has individual health-related outcomes such as a reduction in burnout.**
- **Self-awareness and interpersonal awareness can be developed by identifying and analysing typical situations where EI skills are important, either in your role or that of a colleague respectively.**
- **Review challenging situations and ask patients or colleagues for feedback on your approach.**

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