



Empathetics
better human connections
for better healthcare

Staff Retention Intervention Saves Medical Group Millions of Dollars

Helen Riess, M.D. Founder and Chief Medical Officer, Empathetics, Inc.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

LINK TO A SECTION

➔ Introduction

➔ Understanding the Challenge

➔ Impact on Healthcare Delivery

➔ Strategies for Retention

➔ Case Study and Best Practices: Gould Medical Group

➔ Future Directions and Recommendations

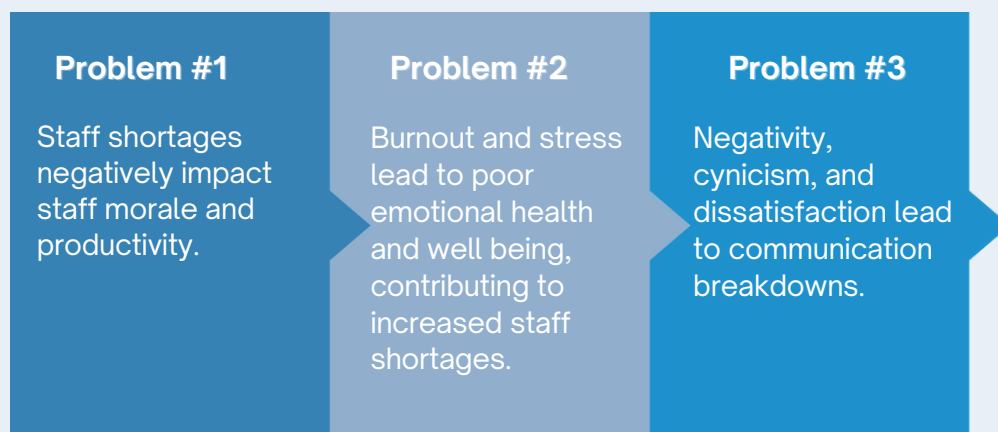
➔ Conclusion

➔ About Empathetics

➔ References

INTRODUCTION

Workforce retention is crucial for maintaining the quality of patient care, institutional knowledge, controlling costs, and fostering a positive work environment in healthcare settings. Healthcare organizations are facing a crisis of professional staff shortages. Workforce staffing is the top challenge facing healthcare CEO's, followed by financial and behavioral health challenges.¹ According to Optum, the cost to retain, attract, and train the healthcare workforce is an overwhelming pain point for all health organizations.²



This white paper will describe the Empathetics partnership with Gould Medical Group (GMG), whose physicians care for patients inside the Sutter Health system as well as others. Implementing Empathetics resulted in seventeen times the retention of staff in the Empathetics-trained group of clinicians versus the untrained group, saving the organization \$18.9M in turnover costs.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

OVER ONE-THIRD OF HOSPITALS PROJECTED TO BE IN THE RED BY YEAR'S END

Current Landscape of Workforce Retention in Healthcare

A fully staffed, healthy workforce is critical to maintaining access to high quality care, especially as hospitals are strained by crises such as surges in COVID-19 hospitalizations. Staffing shortages have forced hospitals to increase wages and to invest significant resources to recruit and retain staff. The American Hospital Association reports that these investments in labor have only exacerbated hospitals' existing financial hardships, with over [one-third of hospitals projected to be in the red](#) by year's end and a median operating margin that's [10% to 11% below pre-pandemic levels](#).³

Physician and nurse workforce retention in the US are facing significant challenges and are among the top three concerns of hospital CEOs. Factors such as long working hours, administrative burdens, and high patient loads contributed to turnover and retention issues. Recruiting, hiring, and training new staff is expensive. Retaining experienced employees can help healthcare organizations save costs associated with turnover. This year, 8.5% of physicians are expected to quit their jobs. This is the national average. The conservative average cost per lost physician is \$1 million. The causes attributed to 65% of physicians leaving their jobs are burnout and stress.⁴ Additionally, 18.4% of nurses are expected to leave their jobs this year. The average turnover cost per bedside RN is \$56,000 and 50% of new nurses quit their job within the first two years of employment.



Empathic leadership has been identified as a leadership superpower.

While empathy and compassion are consistently identified as mission driven values in organizational culture, many healthcare executives are not aware of how to imbue institutional empathy.⁵ Empathy and compassion are not typically associated with creating an adaptive and flexible workplace, but they are mission critical. Successful workplaces recognize that individuals providing healthcare are already among the most resilient, but they also need their workplaces to adapt to emerging needs. These include retaining staff by providing safe environments, communicating with care and valuing them as whole people, providing work settings that allow workforces to grow in communities, and that support their mental health- all are elements of resilient organizations.⁶ High turnover negatively impacts staff morale and productivity. Retaining skilled and dedicated employees fosters a positive work environment, which in turn can improve patient care. Also, experienced healthcare professionals possess valuable institutional knowledge and expertise. Retaining these individuals helps preserve and transfer this knowledge to newer staff members, ensuring a more knowledgeable workforce.

IMPACT ON HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

NURSES LEAVE THE PROFESSION DUE TO BURNOUT AND POOR LEADERSHIP

\$18.9 M

Saved in turnover costs when Empathetics program was implemented.

[A Kaiser Family Foundation/ Washington Post poll](#) found that about 3 in 10 health care workers considered leaving their profession, and about 6 in 10 said pandemic-related stress had harmed their mental health.⁷ In addition, a [survey by AHA's American Organization for Nursing Leadership](#) found that one of the top challenges and reasons for health care staffing shortages reported by nurses was “emotional health and wellbeing of staff”.⁸ This level of burnout coupled with ongoing COVID-19 surges, as well as other existing healthcare workforce pressures, has left hospitals across the country to contend with [critical staffing shortages](#).⁹ Staffing shortages directly impact quality of care. According to a Kaufman Hall report, the number of [full-time equivalent \(FTE\) staff per adjusted occupied bed has gone down nearly 3%](#) from pre-pandemic levels. This has occurred while [patient acuity \(as measured by patient length-of-stay\) has increased by nearly 6% since pre-pandemic levels](#). High turnover rates can disrupt continuity of patient care, leading to gaps in treatment and inconsistent quality. Continuity of care and familiarity with healthcare providers can enhance patient satisfaction and trust, leading to better outcomes and increased loyalty to healthcare facilities.¹⁰ Staffing shortages also lead to increased risks for medical errors, and dissatisfied patients who are more likely to sue, adding additional stress and financial burdens to hospitals and medical staff.¹¹

STRATEGIES FOR RETENTION

IMPROVING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IS ESSENTIAL.

The physical and emotional strain on healthcare workers has led to negativity, cynicism, and dissatisfaction with organizational cultures. Institutions that have ignored these symptoms face a serious threat to their existence. The current burnout epidemic is well known but it has been affecting physicians, nurses, allied health professionals, and staff for more than a decade before it became evident as a healthcare crisis during COVID 19.



Strategies for improving organizational culture are essential for retaining talent. These include, promoting work-life balance, recognizing the sacrifices healthcare workers have made for patients and organizations, and providing opportunities for healing. Healthcare organizations are also realizing there must be opportunities for professional development and advancement. Organizations are challenged to improve compensation and benefits packages as well as, implement mentorship and peer support programs, address workload challenges, and enhance communication and feedback channels, so problems can be identified and addressed in a timely manner.

CASE STUDY AND BEST PRACTICES: SUTTER HEALTH GMG

THE EMPATHETICS-TRAINED GROUP'S TURNOVER RATE WAS ONLY 0.5%.

A case study in which Gould Medical Group (GMG), whose physicians care for patients inside the Sutter Health system in the Central Valley of California, partnered with Empathetics, Inc. a healthcare empathy and relational science training firm in Boston, will demonstrate a successful retention initiative that was implemented with measurable outcomes in retention, employee wellness, and patient experience. Most notably, the turnover rate in the group that was not trained with Empathetics' program was 8.5% (the national average), whereas the Empathetics-trained group's turnover rate was 0.5%, (Figure 1) which is a 1700% difference. Replacing one physician costs organizations about \$1,000,000 conservatively. The Empathetics intervention saved GMG \$18,900,000 in replacement costs.

Clinician Turnover Rate (2023)

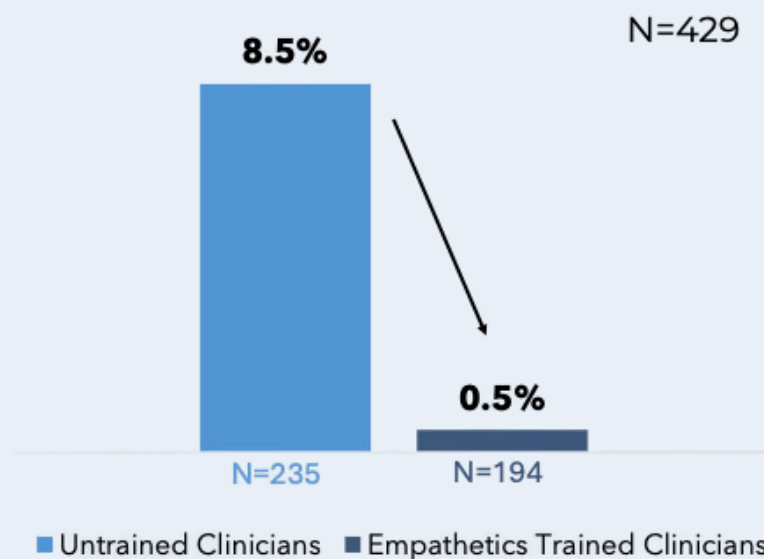


Figure 1

Methodology

Outcome #1: Improvement in the patient experience

In 2019 Dr. Robert Altman, now CEO and President of Sutter Health GMG, sought to improve patient experience with evidence-based training. Beginning with an Empathetics pilot of 53 physicians and nurse practitioners in 2019, GMG showed increased Patient Experience (P/X) Scores by over 2% from baseline. During an expanded implementation in 2022, P/X scores increased over 4% from baseline (Figure 2). Patient experience scores are measured in .10% points.

By the end of 2023, the training had expanded to include more than 1107 participants (446 clinical, 661 non-clinical staff). GMG had tracked P/X scores in addition to wellness, resilience to burnout scores, ratings of staff communication quality, and clinician retention over the past 4 years.

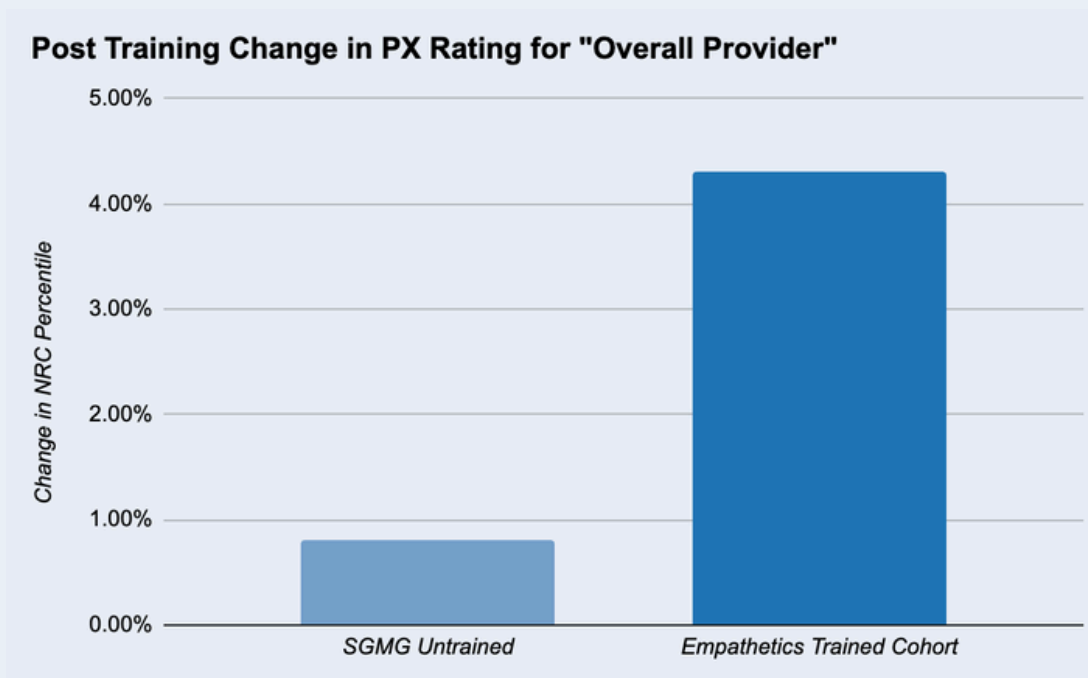


Figure 2

Outcome #2: Improvement in workforce wellness

In 2021 Empathetics developed a healthcare wellness intervention called *Self-Empathy*[®], that was introduced to Sutter Health GMG to provide healing, recovery, and appreciation of staff, prior to the foundational empathy training that was already underway. The *Self-Empathy*[®] program is designed to bring groups of clinicians together to rebuild trust and morale for healthcare clinicians and non-clinicians. The groups learn together to heal and recover and to acknowledge the sacrifices made during the pandemic and in healthcare professions in general. This intervention resulted in improved wellness scores and decreased burnout scores (Figures 4 and 5). Workers who had contemplated leaving their jobs or the profession altogether, found hope. The *Self-Empathy*[®] program also encouraged and normalized addressing mental health needs and helped workers identify the types of support they needed.

In 2023, the professional medical staff of 429 physicians was divided into two groups by GMG. About half the group (n=194) was assigned to participate in the *Self Empathy and Foundational Empathy Training Program*[®] primarily to bolster the patient experience at GMG. No other improvement programs were implemented at the same time and the participation was not voluntary. The second half (n-235) did not participate in the 2023 training. Dr. Altman found that the benefits to the Empathetics trained group exceeded expectations. The most important of which was significant improvement in retention of physicians.

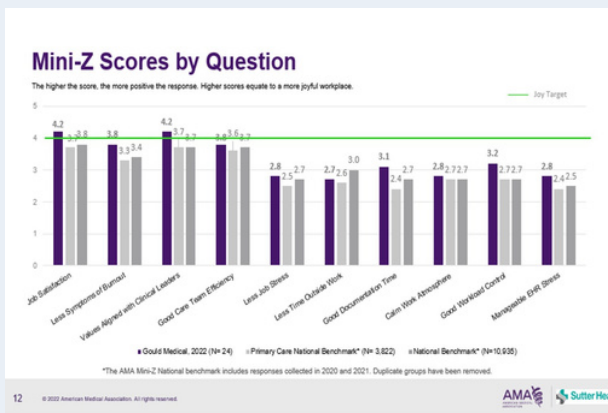


Figure 4

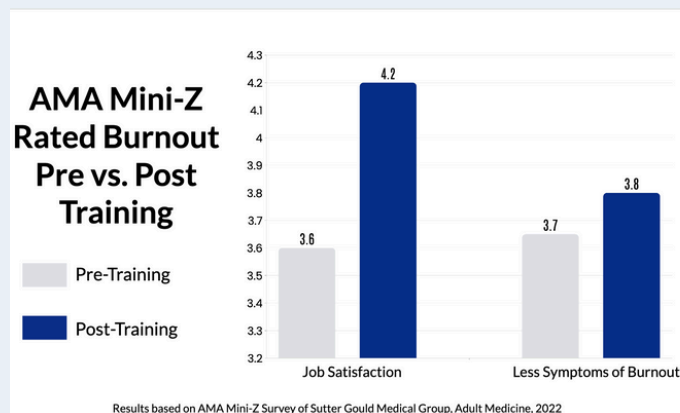


Figure 5

Outcome #3: Improvement in retention

There are many reasons physicians leave their jobs. Burnout, stress, workflows, and documentation requirements are known factors. However, some physicians are promoted to administrative roles and leave their clinical roles. GMG used the conservative measure of including *all resignations*, including those who left the region because of spousal relocations, and those who were promoted out of clinical roles. Even with this conservative methodology for counting resignations, only one physician resigned in the Empathetics-trained group in 2023 (Figure 6). Dr. Altman has described Empathetics as “A wellness tool that also improves the patient experience.” To his surprise, not only did SGMG see a reduction of burnout on the AMA MiniZ scale, GMG also realized a retention rate of clinicians that saved them nearly 19 million dollars. The success at GMG has led to broad adoption across the Sutter Health System. Ongoing measurement indexes are in place to continue to measure burnout, wellness, and patient experience.

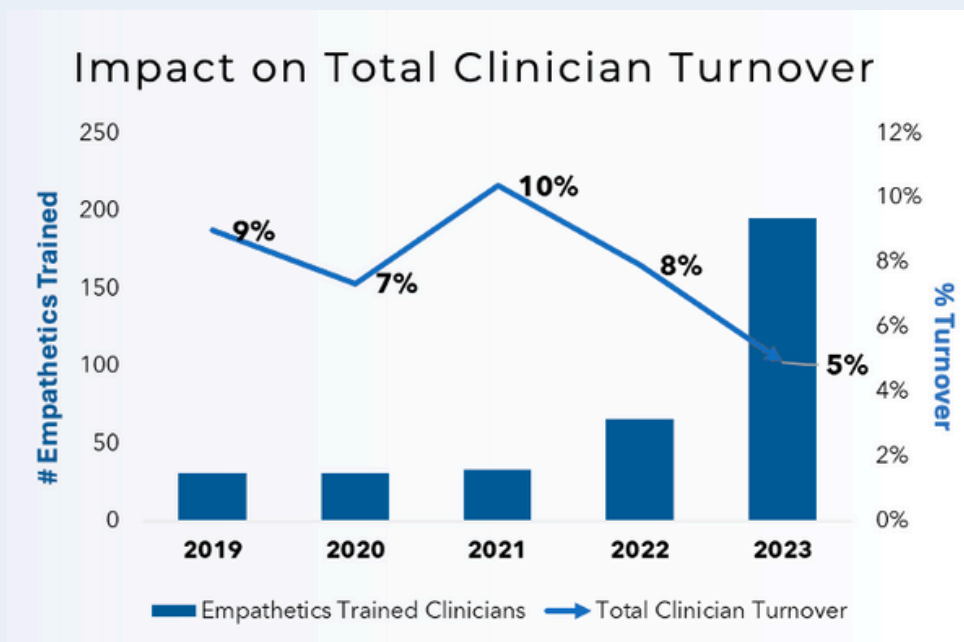


Figure 6

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Emerging trends in workforce retention point to the need for evidence-based interventions to reignite the passion for healthcare professions, reduce workflow challenges, reduce documentation requirements, and utilize technology to reduce administrative burdens. The realignment of healthcare providers to interact meaningfully with patients requires upskilling veteran professionals who may have lost interpersonal skills, and for new professionals who may have had no exposure to interpersonal skills training that makes the work more rewarding, meaningful, and frictionless.



1

Prioritize the patient experience



Prioritizing the patient experience led GMG President and CEO, Dr. Robert Altman, to seek out evidence-based empathy training because empathic and compassionate care are the values he brings to his own practice and leadership. Providing Empathetics training to his entire OB/GYN staff had the additional benefit of re-energizing the clinical staff, increasing morale, and inspiring the non-clinical staff to participate in Empathetics' training.

2

Prioritize the clinician experience



Implementing leadership rounds that engage leaders directly with clinicians will enable leaders to assess what matters most to their workforce. During the pandemic, Dr. Altman and Dr. Adam Dodd, Medical Director of Quality at Sutter Health, appreciated the need for clinicians and staff to engage in healing and recovery from the traumatic experience of working through the pandemic. This has not been satisfied in most organizations. These leaders, together with the Ambulatory CEO for Sutter Health Central Valley Market, Amber Campbell, and Director of Physician Wellness, Marla Arata, MFT, recognized the crises impacting physician wellness and the opportunity to intervene with the Empathetics' new *Self-Empathy Course*®. The improvement in engagement, overall provider, and wellness scores confirms that employers need to prioritize the wellbeing of their workforces by bringing people together to affirm their work and provide skills and techniques for enhancing wellbeing, prioritizing their mental health, and physical wellness.

3

Implement evidence-based interventions



The science of empathy and compassion are not well known to many healthcare leaders, and many tend to take these values for granted. The pandemic has clearly shown that empathy and compassion are mutable traits and require nurturing and skill-based learning to ensure the workforce is equipped to demonstrate these values. Implementing scientifically grounded interventions based in neuroscience that have been clinically proven in controlled trials as well as in the field, yield financial benefits. Organizations often waste time, labor, and resources by trying to build their own programs that lack evidence to effect results that improve the organization’s patient experience, workforce retention, and financial standing.

“A wellness tool that also improves the patient experience.”

Dr. Robert Altman, CEO and President of Gould Medical Group

Other considerations to increase retention

Multiple factors contribute to workforce shortages. Empathetics' solutions focus on expanding wellness in the workforce by enhancing interpersonal communication and connection that create a respectful, purposeful, and enjoyable workplace. While these other considerations are beyond the scope of Empathetics, they must be addressed to ensure a healthy and engaged workforce.

4

Ensure mental health services



Empathetics emphasizes the importance of leaders' prioritizing the mental health of the workforce by 1) normalizing the need for mental health support; 2) making emotional health “check ins” regular and expected; 3) making mental health support resources and referrals available internally and externally to ensure privacy.

5

Conduct workflow audits



Workflow audits can be outsourced to workforce efficiency vendors. However, leadership rounding in lunch rooms, coffee breaks, and other places where workers gather can create an openness to learning what matters most. Wearing scrubs rather than business attire creates a more relaxed feeling and workers enjoy having their concerns heard and remedies found.

6

Implement new technologies



Documentation requirements and communication errors are among the most vexing issues facing clinicians and non-clinicians. There are almost countless technology solutions that can help, but those that ease clinician documentation requirements are among the most important. Examples are: 1) Technologies that inform patient families of patient status without revealing protected healthcare information, such as discharge time, or completion of a test, can ease the communication burdens. 2) Intra-departmental voice communication through bluetooth obviates the need for paging and digital device communication. 3) Ambient digital scribes are allowing for more direct communication between providers and patients.

“Empathetics training was so timely. Empathy is about connection and there is no better time to talk about increasing our empathy towards those we serve and towards our co-workers.”

Cynthia Campbell is the Chief Operating Officer for
BALANCE

CONCLUSION

Although empathy is often considered a soft skill that cannot be taught, original research at Massachusetts General Hospital debunked that myth and showed significant improvement of patient experience in a randomized controlled trial when Empathetics skills were taught and learned.¹⁴ Healthcare executives who recognize the scientific rigor of such research have taken the step to test Empathetics training in their own organizations. Field studies such as the case described herein demonstrate that Empathetics provides the tools and programs to effect essential changes for patients, clinicians, and healthcare workers alike.

Healthcare workers play a crucial role in promoting public health, providing immediate care in emergencies, and saving lives. Their expertise and quick responses can make a significant difference in critical situations, ensuring that patients can recover and return to work and daily activities. When employees are healthy, they are more productive, thus minimizing the impact of health issues on productivity.

Supporting the mental health of healthcare workers is vital to ensure a strong workforce. All levels of the healthcare workforce need empathic understanding and compassion in order to provide that same level of care to patients, colleagues, and others. Healthcare workers also contribute to workforce health by promoting occupational health and safety standards. Finally, a healthy workforce is essential for economic growth. Healthcare workers contribute to the overall well-being of the patients and population. Their own health and ability to deliver compassionate care is essential to create sustainable healthcare leaders and organizations. Implementing evidence-based programs such as Empathetics will ensure excellent patient and clinician experiences and result in more stable, engaged, and effective healthcare delivery systems. By prioritizing a healthy and productive workforce, healthcare leaders help drive economic growth and prosperity because this focus benefits individuals, businesses, and society as a whole.

ABOUT EMPATHETICS

Empathetics teaches empathetic connections that allow all humans to feel seen and heard. This creates empowered organizations where people want to work.

Grounded in neuroscience, Empathetics was founded by Dr. Helen Riess, a clinical and research psychiatrist and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. She is the author of *The Empathy Effect*. She developed the first empathy training intervention grounded in neuroscience and tested its effects in multiple clinical specialties in several pilot studies and a randomized, controlled trial at Massachusetts General Hospital. Results demonstrated empathy can be taught and learned by physicians and led to measurably improved patient experience scores.



For more information, please contact us.

www.empathetics.com

info@empathetics.com

References

1. Gooch K. The workforce challenges are top of mind for hospital CEO's. Becker's Hospital Review. February 2024.
2. Optum C-Suite Check-in: The healthcare workforce crisis. (c) 2022 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF8444804; November 2022
3. <https://www.aha.org/fact-sheets/2021-11-01-data-brief-health-care-workforce-challenges-threaten-hospitals-ability-care>
4. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/03/covid-burnout-hitting-all-levels-of-health-care-workforce/>
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/11/21/four-superpowers-of-top-executives/?sh=19db07d12578>
6. Riess H. Institutional Resilience: The foundation for individual resilience, especially during COVID-19. Global Advances in Health and Medicine. April, 2021. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/21649561211006728>
7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/04/22/health-workers-covid-quit/>
8. <https://www.aonl.org/resources/nursing-leadership-survey>
9. https://www.nsinursingsolutions.com/Documents/Library/NSI_National_Health_Care_Retention_Report.pdf
10. Kelley JM, Kraft-Todd G, Schapira L, Kossowsky J, Riess H. The influence of the patient-clinician relationship on healthcare outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. PLOS ONE, 2014; 9(4): e94207. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0094207
11. https://www.kaufmanhall.com/sites/default/files/2021-09/national-hospital-flash-report_sept.-2021_final.pdf
12. Riess H. Empathy in Medicine: A neurobiological perspective. JAMA, 2010; 304(14) 1604-1605.
13. Riess H, Kelley JM, Bailey RW, Konowitz P, Gray ST. Improving empathy and relational skills in Otolaryngology residents: A pilot study. Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery, 2011; 144 (1) 120 -122.
14. Riess H, Kelley, JM, Bailey, RW, Dunn, EJ, Phillips M. Empathy training for resident physicians: A randomized controlled trial of a neuroscience-informed curriculum. J Gen Int Med, 2012; 27(10) 1280-1286.