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“All I could do was hand her another tissue” : handling emotions as a challenge in reflective writing texts by medical students

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In some medical teaching institutions, students have to partake in compulsory training in communication skills. They are required to demonstrate good listening skills, to repeat, mirror and summarize information, structure an interview and use open and closed questions. They are also informed that they will be confronted with their own and their patients' emotions during a consultation and they are asked to develop methods of signaling empathy. This essay reports on data collected from medical students at a British university who wrote a reflective text in which they explore their communicative behavior in connection with a memorable encounter with a patient. While they are prompted to think about how they felt during their encounter and hence the mention of emotions is frequent in the texts, our thematic content analysis reveals that some of the students choose the topic of handling emotions during a patient encounter as particularly noteworthy. We observe that students are affected by the positive and negative emotional stance of the patients and draw on an impressive scope of emotion words. When creating an emotional stance in their text, students draw on verbal cues and they use language to describe vocal, body, physiological and facial cues. They also enact emotions in constructed dialogue.

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