

'To Disclose or Not to Disclose': An Investigation of Counselor Self-Disclosure in the Field of Genetic Counseling.

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The use of self-disclosure, in a genetic counseling session has not been well studied. This online experimental study compared patient perceptions of unsolicited personal self-disclosure to determine if the act of self-disclosure or prior knowledge of the counselor's personal experience influenced patient perception of the genetic counselor. Four hypothetical cancer genetic counseling sessions were created with Qualtrics. Each session included a written background scenario and a short video clip. Two background scenarios and two video clips were almost identical, differing only on the variable of self-disclosure, either disclosing (D) or non-disclosing (N). The four sessions made up the possible combinations of disclosing or non-disclosing background plus video. 123 participants, recruited through Amazon MechanicalTurk, were randomly assigned to one of the four genetic counseling sessions, and asked to rate the counselor-patient relationship using three subscales derived from the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory scale, a tool to measure the alliance of the client-therapist interaction. An ANOVA showed a significant main effect of the video [$F(1, 119) = 8.78, p < .005$] influencing participants' perceptions of the counselor-patient relationship. Participants in groups DD and ND perceived the genetic counselor to have a higher level of regard, empathic understanding, and willingness to be known ($M = 88.16, SD = 31.80$), compared to groups DN and NN ($M = 71.68, SD = 29.94$). Analysis also showed a significant background by video interaction, $F(1, 119) = 4.09, p < .05$, suggesting self-disclosure in the background scenario influenced participants' perception of the overall counselor-patient alliance. The data indicates participants perceived the video in which the counselor self-discloses more favorably in the absence of personal background information about the genetic counselor, compared to the presence of such information. Further assessment of the use of self-disclosure as a technique to better foster the counselor-patient relationship is warranted.