

Title (Sentence case, max 15 words)

Empathic inquiry training: A successful approach to assessing social needs among patients

Abstract (max 300 words)

Background

Health systems are increasingly screening patients for social needs. At [redacted health system], food security screening was incorporated into the clinical workflow for Medical Assistants (MAs) across all primary care clinics in April 2021. Analysis of screening data in June 2021 showed MAs were not consistently screening patients and responses indicating food insecurity were lower than expected.

Objective:

Improve social needs screening rates and results among patients through training.

Methods

A survey revealed MAs did not understand the screening process, MAs were uncomfortable asking sensitive questions, and MAs felt patients were uncomfortable answering honestly. The team then developed and implemented a 30-minute Empathic Inquiry (EI) training curriculum for MAs to provide details on the screening process to answer any patient questions, and equip MAs with empathy and communication skills to build trust so both MAs and patients feel more comfortable during screening. The live training used videos, scenarios, and roleplay. Pre- and post-training surveys collected feedback and assessed participant knowledge.

Results

From January – May 2022, 43 trainings were held with 380+ primary care staff. 203 pre-surveys and 109 post-surveys were analyzed. The majority found the presentation style (88.1%) and the videos/scenarios (85.3%) to be helpful. 98.4% knew the definition of ‘empathy’ at baseline. Correctly defining ‘implicit bias’ rose from 76.6% to 89.1% after the training. Qualitative data revealed participants had improved knowledge on the screening process and how to practice empathy (*i.e.* “*put myself in the patients’ shoes*”). Importantly, correct screening rates improved: at baseline, 19% of patients who were eligible to be screened were missed; this dropped to 13% post-trainings.

Conclusion

Empathy is a critical skill for healthcare providers screening patients for social needs. EI training helped many participants better understand and feel more comfortable with the screening process. Future work must optimize training frequency for continuous improvement.