Use of Simulation to Improve Empathy Among Undergraduate Students

Author: Steven S. Bowen, OTD, OTR/L, CAPS

Allen College
UnityPoint Health

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify how use of age-simulation gear during daily activities affects empathy in undergraduate-aged students; in this case, specifically relating to aging adults.

Background

- College-aged students' propensity for empathy has dropped significantly in the last few decades. There is a correlation between this drop and dismissive attitudes toward others (Konrath, et al., 2014).
- College-aged students are less likely to show empathy to people outside their peer-group (Konrath, et al., 2014). Several studies have identified ways to improve understanding and empathy.
- Use of simulation has shown improved empathy for nursing students (Maruca, Diaz, Kuhnly, and Jeffries, 2015) and Emergency Medicine Interns (Nelson et al., 2017).

*References available upon request

Description of Study

- Participants wore age-simulation gear
- Gear included simulation of low-vision; low-hearing; decrease joint mobility of neck, elbows, and knees; arthritis; and weighted gear to increase demand of activities
- Participants were given a specific set of daily activities to complete such as making a bed, loading a dishwasher, hanging clothes in a closet, and vacuuming

Methods

- Mixed-method design utilized to answer research questions
- Quantitative Pre/Post test using The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire
- Qualitative: Focus Group open discussion after completion of the activities

Results

Qualitative data; results from focus group:

1. How did you feel during the experience?

   "It was difficult to do all the activities and it puts a perspective on how older adults must feel"

2. How did the use of aging simulation influence your views on the aging population?

   "I definitely feel more empathetic, because you really don't understand that until you know… they have all these problems that make things more difficult"

   "Helped me relate more to think pain and what their daily life is like"

Results Continued

3. What were aspects of the experience that were surprising?

   "Thinking about my family with hearing loss, not feeling part of the conversation, not knowing exactly what is being said"

4. Thinking about the aging population, what are you more concerned about after this experience?

   "Just kind of the way they are viewed and treated. You don't realize how difficult it is for them to do simple tasks so more patience and understanding"

5. Please talk about how this experience relates to understanding function from a different perspective

   "Everyday household tasks you don't think about it but someone of that age, they put a lot of time and effort [into it]"

6. What are the positive or negative responses to this experience

   Negative: ***"Not being able to do everything that you could once do"***

   Positive: ***"I gained a more empathetic understanding"***

Discussion

- Use of aging simulation seems to improve empathy toward the aging population
- Simulations can promote understanding of targeted populations
- To avoid negative stigmatization, it is important to emphasize the benefits of aging rather than focus only on the potential struggles