



# What Doctors Feel: How Emotions Affect the Practice of Medicine

By Danielle Ofri

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**What Doctors Feel: How Emotions Affect the Practice of Medicine** By Danielle Ofri

**A look at the emotional side of medicine—the shame, fear, anger, anxiety, empathy, and even love that affect patient care**

Physicians are assumed to be objective, rational beings, easily able to detach as they guide patients and families through some of life's most challenging moments. But doctors' emotional responses to the life-and-death dramas of everyday practice have a profound impact on medical care. And while much has been written about the minds and methods of the medical professionals who save our lives, precious little has been said about their emotions. In *What Doctors Feel*, Dr. Danielle Ofri has taken on the task of dissecting the hidden emotional responses of doctors, and how these directly influence patients.

How do the stresses of medical life—from paperwork to grueling hours to lawsuits to facing death—affect the medical care that doctors can offer their patients? Digging deep into the lives of doctors, Ofri examines the daunting range of emotions—shame, anger, empathy, frustration, hope, pride, occasionally despair, and sometimes even love—that permeate the contemporary doctor-patient connection. Drawing on scientific studies, including some surprising research, Dr. Danielle Ofri offers up an unflinching look at the impact of emotions on health care.

With her renowned eye for dramatic detail, Dr. Ofri takes us into the swirling heart of patient care, telling stories of caregivers caught up and occasionally torn down by the whirlwind life of doctoring. She admits to the humiliation of an error that nearly killed one of her patients and her forever fear of making another. She mourns when a beloved patient is denied a heart transplant. She tells the riveting stories of an intern traumatized when she is forced to let a newborn die in her arms, and of a doctor whose daily glass of wine to handle the frustrations of the ER escalates into a destructive addiction. But doctors don't only feel fear, grief, and frustration. Ofri also reveals that doctors tell bad jokes about "toxic sock syndrome," cope through gallows humor, find hope in impossible situations, and surrender to ecstatic happiness when they triumph over illness. The stories

here reveal the undeniable truth that emotions have a distinct effect on how doctors care for their patients. For both clinicians and patients, understanding what doctors feel can make all the difference in giving and getting the best medical care.

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### Editorial Review

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**\*Starred Review\*** Tucked inside a white lab coat or scrub suit is a welter of human emotions that can play a large role in a doctor's decision-making process. Ofri, an internist at New York's Bellevue Hospital, explores the emotional core of doctoring. Suturing together her own experiences, the plights of memorable patients, and interviews with other physicians, she examines the diverse feelings—anger, grief, shame, disillusionment, gratitude, humility, joy—that can fluster or elevate physicians. “Fear is a primal emotion in medicine,” she writes, and doctors worry about making a mistake or even killing a patient. Sadness is an occupational hazard, and “A thread of sorrow weaves through the daily life of medicine.” Then there's empathy. Is it innate, acquired, or both, and why do third-year medical students lose it? Ofri exposes her emotional side as she recounts the story of a longtime patient, an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala who finally receives a heart transplant but dies shortly after the procedure. Ofri admits, “Doctors who are angry, nervous, jealous, burned out, terrified, or ashamed can usually still treat bronchitis or ankle sprains competently.” Yet her insightful and invigorating book makes the case that it's better for patients if a physician's emotional compass-needle points in a positive direction. --Tony Miksanek

### Review

“Taut, vivid prose. . . . She writes for a lay audience with a practiced hand.” —*New York Times*

“Here is a book that is at once sad and joyful, frightening and thought-provoking. In her lucid and passionate explanations of the important role that emotions play in the practice of medicine and in healing and health, Danielle Ofri tells stories of great importance to both doctors and patients.” —Perri Klass, author of *Treatment Kind and Fair: Letters to a Young Doctor*

“An invaluable guide for doctors and patients on how to ‘recognize and navigate the emotional subtexts’ of the doctor-patient relationship.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Yet her insightful and invigorating book makes the case that it's better for patients if a physician's emotional compass-needle points in a positive direction.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“Rich and deeply insightful. . . . A fascinating journey into the heart and mind of a physician struggling to do the best for her patients while navigating an imperfect health care system.” —*Boston Globe*

“With grace, courage, humility, and compassion, Bellevue Hospital physician Ofri gives voice and color to the heartbreak, stress, and joy that attends medical practice.” —*Library Journal*

“A fabulous read.” —*Greater Good*

### About the Author

**Danielle Ofri, MD, PhD** is an associate professor of medicine at New York University School of Medicine and has cared for patients at New York's Bellevue Hospital for more than two decades. She is the author of *Singular Intimacies: Becoming a Doctor at Bellevue*, *Incidental Findings: Lessons from My Patients in the Art of Medicine*, and *Medicine in Translation: Journeys with My Patients*. Dr. Ofri is a regular contributor to the *New York Times*' Well blog as well as the *Times*' “Science Times” section and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Her writings have appeared in *Best American Essays* and *Best American Science Writing*. She is

the editor in chief of the *Bellevue Literary Review*. Dr. Ofri lives in New York City with her husband, three children, and their loyal lab mutt.

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