

## Emotional fluidity in chronic care

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### Abstract

In this exploratory opinion piece, we define emotional fluidity as a state of changing emotions which influence choice of, attitudes and behaviour towards, and response to, chronic health care and therapy. This manifests clinically as changing opinions regarding suitability of modern health care, and as or varying, responses to suggestions and interventions from the health care team. Diabetes distress is an extreme example of emotional fluidity. Emotional fluidity also encompasses the variability of the health care professional's response to emotional and medical needs of persons seeking care. This can be inter-individual or intra-individual, and can be influenced by compassion fatigue. Health care professionals should be aware of emotional fluidity, and should be able to address its negative impact, as well as amplify its positive influence.

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### Introduction

The word fluidity is used not only in physics, but also in biochemistry (membrane fluidity), physiology (endocrine fluidity) and gender health (gender fluidity).<sup>1</sup> In this communication, we define and describe the concept of emotional fluidity, and discuss how it is relevant to chronic care specifically obesity management.

### Domains Of Fluidity In Chronic Care

From a chronic care perspective, fluidity is a multi-faceted construct. Four domains form this rubric: the disease, the person living with the condition, the health care provider, and the health care ecosystem.<sup>2</sup> Chronic care itself is fluid, changing and evolving over time. Its individualized and person centred ethos lends it to inter-individual fluidity.

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The natural history of chronic disease necessitates "dynamic fluidity", or change, in intra-individual management as well. What may be appropriate today for a particular person, may be contraindicated tomorrow.

The person living with chronic disease, too, is fluid in terms of health care-seeking and health care-accepting behaviour. Multiple factors, both internal and environmental, modify the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to modern chronic care. A person who refuses to accept insulin, or weight lowering intervention today, may be willing to try it at a later date.

Chronic health care professionals are also subject to fluidity. Science is an evolving field. Newer diagnostics and drugs are being developed regularly, and a particular health care professional's knowledge improves with time. Social and soft skills also vary from situation. This implies that chronic care delivery is fluid as well, in both style and content.

### Impact Of Fluidity

All these factors - the fluidity of the health care system, the condition being managed, the person living with the disease, and the health care provider's skills and delivery - are important determinants of therapeutic outcomes. In this article, we focus on emotional fluidity as a meaningful factor in optimizing the chronic health care process. We conceptualize emotional fluidity, describe its facets from the lens of person living with chronic disease as well as chronic care professional, and suggest pragmatic ways of harnessing this phenomenon for better results.

### Emotional Fluidity

The phrase emotional fluidity has been used by earlier authors in a psychoanalytical or romantic context.<sup>3,4</sup> From a medical perspective, we define emotional fluidity as a state of changing emotions which influence choice of, attitudes and behaviour towards, and response to, chronic health care and therapy. This manifests clinically as changing opinions regarding suitability of modern health care, and as or varying, responses to suggestions and interventions from the health care team.

Multiple factors contribute to this: knowledge and information gained from multiple sources; awareness and insight, created by discussion and dialogue; and concerns and complaints, which are part of the natural history of

**Table-1:** Common emotions in persons seeking health care.

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- Anxiety
- Anger
- Argumentativeness
- Arrogance
- Avowed denial
- Apathy
- Acceptance and agreement

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disease. Diabetes distress is an example of extreme emotional response to the challenges and demands of living with diabetes.<sup>5</sup>

Emotional fluidity, from a provider’s viewpoint, is the variability of the health care professional’s response to emotional and medical needs of persons seeking care. This can be inter-individual (varying from person to person) and intra-individual (changing, for the same person, from time to time). This fluidity, too, is influenced by multiple factors: personal skill development and mood status, the conductivity (or otherwise) of the health care ecosystem, and the behaviour of patients and their care givers. Compassion fatigue, a well described phenomenon, is an extreme end of the spectrum of emotional fluidity in a health care professional.<sup>6</sup>

**Clinical Impact**

As there is a strong psychosocial component of chronic care, psychosocial fluidity cannot be ignored. Emotions influence delivery, quality of delivery, acceptance, and quality of response to chronic health care.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 lists the common emotions encountered in clinical praxis. As mentioned earlier, these are not static, and are subject to great variability of fluidity. Table 2 lists a few practical pointers in this context. Health care professionals should

**Table-2:** Emotional fluidity and chronic care.

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**IN GENERAL**

- Acknowledge the emotional status of the person seeking health care
- Remember that no emotion is permanent
- Be aware of the role of emotions in seeking, accepting and responding to health care
- Be aware of the role of one’s own emotions in offering and sharing health care
- Practice equanimity and equipoise in order to offer better medical care

**IN SPECIFIC**

- Offer emotional first aid as and when required
- Identify and address negative emotions in an appropriate manner
- Do not make statements, or exhibit behaviours, which discourage the person living with chronic disease from continuing engagement with the health care system
- Appreciate positive emotions and utilize them to encourage health care
- Encourage emotional agility as a means of understanding and responding to one’s emotions.

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be aware of this concept, and should craft strategies to minimize the negative impact of, and amplify the positive influence of emotional fluidity in clinical practice.

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