



How I do it

Surgery with compassion: A potential shift in surgical paradigms

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Summary

Modern surgical advances have improved outcomes, yet compassion remains underemphasized in surgical practice. There is ample evidence demonstrating the benefits of compassionate care for both providers and patients. The "Surgery with Compassion" initiative aims to incorporate this essential quality into surgical practice. As part of this concept, we developed the "Surgical Compassion Pause," a brief, intentional moment of reflection introduced just

after the Time Out procedure. It is centered on both the patient and the surgical team and is based on the "4 C's"—Conscious Awareness, Courage, Commitment to Purpose, and Caring Connections—which together create a safe and meaningful operating room environment. This pause strengthens team bonds and provides reassurance to patients and families. We propose that, when combined with broader compassion training, it creates lasting, positive impacts for everyone involved.

Introduction

Modern surgical advancements have improved precision and outcomes, but compassion remains underemphasized in surgical practice and training. Compassion is commonly understood as the ability to perceive and acknowledge suffering in oneself and others, while actively working to alleviate and prevent it [1].

Research shows that healthcare professionals who practice compassion experience reduced stress, lower burnout rates, and improved well-being [2,3]. Compassionate care also enhances patients outcome by fostering understanding and support. Patients feel heard and respected, which leads to reduced symptom severity, better physical and mental health, lower mortality rates and improved medication adherence [2–4].

Recognizing the need to integrate compassion into surgical practice, we developed the concept of "Surgery with Compassion," which emphasizes cultivating compassion in surgeons while promoting empathetic care for patients and acknowledging our shared humanity.

Methods

We introduced the "Surgical Compassion Pause" into our surgeries—a brief yet intentional moment of reflection centered on both the patient and the care providers. Following

the safety pause and just before the incision is made, the lead surgeon initiates a verbal pause based on the following principles.

This pause is grounded in "The 4 C's" as central concepts:

1. **Conscious Awareness** — Being mindful of our thoughts, emotions, and sensations to connect with our compassionate self.
2. **Courage** — Making wise, informed decisions while facing fear or adversity.
3. **Commitment to Purpose** — Reconnecting with our individual purpose to be present in the moment and with our shared mission to alleviate suffering and achieve the best possible outcomes for our patients.
4. **Caring Connections** — Building genuine concern for others' well-being, fostering an environment where everyone feels valued and cared for.

This pause lasts no more than a 2 min, yet it is profound, embodied, and compassionate, creating a safe environment for the surgery to take place and making a meaningful impact on everyone in the operating room. See "script" in [Insert 1](#).

To cultivate and promote the compassionate qualities we also developed "Surgery with Compassion for Surgeons", a compassion training program specifically tailored for surgical professionals. This course focuses on the Compassion Pause and on nurturing compassion to ourselves, our teams, and our patients in the

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Insert 1**Example of a Surgical Compassion Pause**

The lead surgeon might begin the pause by stating:

"Let's take a moment to breathe mindfully before we begin the surgery. Let us be fully present here, focused on the surgery ahead for this patient (name). Leave outside this room what doesn't belong in this moment. Let's set aside emotions, concerns, and thoughts unrelated to this surgery. Let's reconnect with our purpose—the reason we chose to become caregivers. Let's remember why we are here, in this very moment, seeking to help this patient in the best possible way, with the courage needed to face complex situations and decisions. We will do what is within our ability to relieve their pain and suffering, honoring the trust that the patient and their family have placed in us. Let us recognize the importance of being here together as a team and the critical role each of us plays. Let's take some deep breath before we start"

surgical field. We are currently measuring its impact on surgeons and the qualitative changes it brings to surgical teams and patient care.

Results

Since integrating the "Surgical Compassion Pause" into our pediatric urology surgeries, we have observed its remarkable ability to strengthen connections within the surgical team and between caregivers and patients. It redefines the surgical act—not merely as a technical procedure but as a shared, sacred moment of human connection.

The introduction of the 'Surgical Compassion Pause' by other surgeons at University Hospitals, for adults awake patients just before anesthesia, had a significant impact. This practice not only heightened the surgical team's awareness of compassion but also provided patients with a sense of calm, trust, and reassurance during one of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

This moment of caring connection is the essence of compassionate care. Adult patients have described the experience as transformative, expressing deep gratitude for the compassion shown by their surgeons at such a critical time. Similarly, families of pediatric patients who experienced the Surgical Compassion Pause in the pre-anesthesia unit, before going to the operating room, have shared how meaningful this mindful and compassionate moment felt before their child's surgery.

We propose that, when complemented by broader compassion training, the "Compassion Pause" fosters deeper and more impactful transformations for everyone involved.

Conclusions

We are at a pivotal moment where hyperconnectivity and technological advances often distract us from our shared humanity. In the field of surgery, we must work to restore and embody the values that connect us as human beings, whether we are the surgeon or the patient. We are responsible not only for performing a surgical act but for leading the

compassion that unites us in our shared goal: to become better individuals and teams in our efforts to help others. It is time to address the aspects we have not "formally" learned on the long path to becoming surgeons. It is time to change the paradigm. It is time for *Surgery with Compassion*.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were NOT used in the preparation of this work.

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Conflict of interest

None.

References

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