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CASE REPORT

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Post-Operative Complications: Navigating Patient Concerns: Exploring Communication and Empathy with Margaret "Maggie" Thompson

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ABSTRACT

The case report presents a simulation designed for nursing students to enhance their skills in empathetic communication and patient education through interaction with Margaret "Maggie" Thompson, a 58-year-old teacher facing post-operative complications following a laparoscopic cholecystectomy. The primary learning objectives are for students to practice empathetic communication, explain medical conditions in plain language, identify and address hidden patient concerns, use active listening and open-ended questions to build rapport, and recognize the emotional impact of delayed recovery on patients and their families. In the simulated scenario, students engage with Maggie to understand her concerns, provide clear explanations, and use empathetic communication to reassure her. They address her questions about her condition, potential treatments, and the recovery process while respecting her emotional state. This case is valuable in a curriculum for developing foundational skills in communication, empathy, and patient-centered care, which are essential for advanced beginner nursing students progressing toward independent practice.

Keywords post-operative care; communication; empathy; patient education; nursing

CASE OVERVIEW

In this case, participants will interact with Margaret "Maggie" Thompson, a 58-year-old elementary school teacher experiencing complications after a laparoscopic cholecystectomy. Participants will practice empathetic communication to address Maggie's fears and concerns about her health, family, and future.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Practice empathetic communication with patients experiencing uncertainty.
2. Explain medical conditions and procedures in plain language.
3. Identify and address hidden patient concerns.
4. Use active listening and open-ended questions to build rapport.
5. Recognize the emotional impact of delayed recovery on patients and their families.

SIMULATED CHARACTER

Name. Margaret "Maggie" Thompson

Demographics. 58-year-old female; elementary school teacher

Personality and mood. Friendly; Independent; Organized; Optimistic; Caring; Normally calm under pressure

Identity, purpose and background. Maggie is a dedicated teacher and a caring individual who is currently feeling overwhelmed and anxious due to unexpected post-surgical complications.

Simulation behaviour. Engage with Maggie to understand her concerns, provide clear explanations, and use empathetic communication to reassure her. Address her questions about her condition, potential treatments, and recovery process while respecting her emotional state.

Opening line

> Hi, I'm Margaret, but you can call me Maggie. I'm just trying to make sense of all that's happening.

DEBRIEFING DIMENSIONS

Create rapport quickly (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Introduces self appropriately; uses patient's preferred name; demonstrates professional presence and courtesy; establishes basic rapport in structured scenarios; may need prompting for warmth or connection (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy; Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation;Domain 10.1a: Demonstrate a commitment to personal health and well-being)

*Award 2 points for: Consistently creates rapport quickly across diverse situations; adapts approach to patient emotional state and context; demonstrates genuine warmth and connection; establishes trust efficiently even in challenging (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy (advanced);Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families;Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation (advanced); Domain 10.1a: Demonstrate commitment to personal health and well-being (advanced))

Elicit all concerns (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Asks open-ended question to elicit concerns; attempts to gather complete list; uses "What else?" or similar; may miss some concerns without prompting; demonstrates beginning skill in organizing patient agenda (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families; Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate the ability to build partnerships with individuals and families;Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles in care delivery)

*Award 2 points for: Consistently elicits comprehensive list of concerns; uses effective probing ("What else?" "Anything more?"); ensures all concerns are voiced; organizes concerns clearly; adapts approach to patient communication style (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced);Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced);Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles (advanced);Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety)

Negotiate the agenda (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Acknowledges patient's concerns; identifies priorities; attempts to establish shared agenda; may struggle with time management, competing priorities, or conflict; negotiation may feel one-sided at times (Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate the ability to build partnerships with individuals and families; Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families;Domain 9.3a: Demonstrate accountability for care delivery)

*Award 2 points for: Skillfully negotiates agenda balancing patient priorities and clinical needs; manages competing concerns effectively; addresses disagreements; establishes clear, mutually agreed-upon plan; demonstrates flexibility and partnership (Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced); Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families (advanced); Domain 6.3a: Communicate with other members of the healthcare team; Domain 9.3a: Demonstrate accountability for care delivery (advanced))

Open the conversation (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Uses open-ended questions to begin; allows patient to speak without early interruption; demonstrates beginning patient-centered approach; may need prompting to maintain openness (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families; Domain 1.1a: Demonstrate an understanding of the discipline of nursing's distinct perspective; Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy)

*Award 2 points for: Consistently opens conversation with effective open-ended questions; allows patient to tell story without interruption; demonstrates strong patient-centered approach; creates space for patient narrative (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced);Domain 1.1a: Demonstrate understanding of nursing's distinct perspective (advanced);Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy (advanced);Domain 2.4a: Integrate evidence-based practice into care delivery)

Explore perspective (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Asks about patient's understanding, beliefs, or concerns; attempts to elicit patient perspective; gathers essential information; may miss opportunities to explore deeper meaning or subtle cues (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy
Domain 1.2a: Apply theory and evidence-based knowledge from nursing and other disciplines)

*Award 2 points for: Skillfully explores patient perspective; asks clarifying questions; demonstrates genuine curiosity; elicits deeper understanding of patient's experience, beliefs, and values; recognizes and follows subtle cues (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy (advanced)
Domain 1.2a: Apply theory and evidence-based knowledge (advanced)
Domain 2.9a: Provide care that reflects an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion)

Name emotions (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Identifies obvious emotions (sadness, anger, fear); names emotions with moderate accuracy; may miss subtle or complex emotions; demonstrates awareness of emotional content (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy
Domain 1.1a: Demonstrate understanding of nursing's distinct perspective
Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation)

*Award 2 points for: Accurately identifies and names emotions including subtle and complex feelings; uses emotion words appropriately and sensitively; validates patient's emotional experience; demonstrates sophisticated emotional

awareness (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy (advanced)
Domain 1.1a: Demonstrate understanding of nursing's distinct perspective (advanced)
Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation (advanced))

Respond with empathy (PEARLS) (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Uses 2-3 PEARLS components with some prompting; demonstrates empathy in straightforward situations; responses may feel somewhat formulaic; shows genuine care but may lack depth (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy
Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation
Domain 9.2a: Demonstrate accountability for nursing practice)

*Award 2 points for: Consistently uses multiple PEARLS components spontaneously (Partnership, Empathy, Apology/Acknowledgment, Respect, Legitimation, Support); empathic responses feel genuine and individualized; adapts PEARLS to patient needs; demonstrates deep compassion (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy (advanced)
Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced)
Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation (advanced)
Domain 9.2a: Demonstrate accountability for nursing practice (advanced))

Transition to clinician-directed encounter (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Signals transition appropriately; maintains rapport during shift; balances patient-centered and clinician-directed approaches; transition may feel abrupt at times; may need prompting (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles in care delivery
Domain 9.3a: Demonstrate accountability for care delivery)

*Award 2 points for: Smoothly transitions between patient-centered and clinician-directed portions; maintains rapport throughout; balances approaches skillfully; transition feels natural; explains rationale when appropriate (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety
Domain 9.3a: Demonstrate accountability for care delivery (advanced))

Share information: Orient patient (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Orients patient to information-sharing portion of encounter; signals transition; may need prompting for clarity (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles)

*Award 2 points for: Clearly orients patient to information-sharing; signals transition smoothly; prepares patient for what's coming; creates receptive environment (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety)

Share information: Incorporate perspective (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point if: Attempts to incorporate patient perspective into information-sharing; asks about patient understanding; may miss opportunities to fully integrate patient's view (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships
Domain 1.2a: Apply theory and evidence-based knowledge)

*Award 2 points if: Consistently incorporates patient perspective throughout information-sharing; builds on patient's understanding; adapts information to patient's frame of reference; demonstrates true partnership (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced)
Domain 2.4a: Integrate evidence-based practice into care delivery
Domain 1.2a: Apply theory and evidence-based knowledge (advanced))

Share information: Use plain language (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 points if: Uses plain language most of the time; avoids some jargon; may occasionally use medical terms without explanation; adapts to health literacy level with prompting (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.9a: Provide care that reflects understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles)

*Award 2 points if: Consistently uses plain language appropriate to patient's health literacy level; avoids jargon or explains terms clearly; checks for understanding; adapts language based on patient cues (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.9a: Provide care that reflects understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles (advanced))

Share information: ART Loops (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 points if: Uses ART framework (Ask > Respond > Tell) with some prompting; demonstrates beginning skill in interactive information-sharing; may default to one-way information delivery at times (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles)

*Award 2 points for: Skillfully employs ART Loops throughout information-sharing; consistently asks, responds to patient input, then tells; creates interactive dialogue; adapts based on patient responses (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety
Domain 2.4a: Integrate evidence-based practice into care delivery)

Assess understanding: Teach-back using ART (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 points if: Asks patient to teach back information; uses ART framework; assesses understanding; may miss gaps in understanding or need prompting to clarify; teach-back may feel mechanical

*Award 2 points if: Consistently and skillfully uses teach-back with ART framework; assesses understanding thoroughly; identifies and addresses gaps; adapts explanation based on teach-back responses; ensures comprehension; teach-back feels natural (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety (advanced)
Domain 5.1a: Apply quality improvement principles (advanced)
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.4a: Integrate evidence-based practice into care delivery)

Close the visit: Clarify next steps (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Clarifies next steps; provides basic information about follow-up; may miss some details or need prompting for completeness (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety
Domain 9.3a: Demonstrate accountability for care delivery)

*Award 2 points for: Clearly and thoroughly clarifies next steps; ensures patient understands what to do, when, and why; addresses logistics; confirms patient ability to follow through (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety (advanced)
Domain 9.3a: Demonstrate accountability for care delivery (advanced)
Domain 6.3a: Communicate with other members of the healthcare team)

Close the visit: Elicit final questions (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed

*Award 1 point for: Asks if patient has questions; allows time for response; may need prompting to probe further or

ensure all questions addressed (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families)
*Award 2 points for: Actively elicits final questions using open invitation; creates space for patient to ask; probes to ensure all questions addressed; responds thoroughly to all concerns (Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced)
Domain 2.6a: Demonstrate accountability to individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 5.2a: Contribute to a culture of patient safety)

Close the visit: Acknowledge and support (max 2)

*Award 0 points if not observed
*Award 1 point for: Acknowledges patient and provides basic support; closure may feel rushed or incomplete at times; demonstrates care (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy
Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families
Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation)
*Award 2 points for: Meaningfully acknowledges patient; provides appropriate support and encouragement; closure feels complete and supportive; leaves patient feeling cared for and prepared (Domain 2.1a: Demonstrate qualities of empathy (advanced)
Domain 2.2a: Communicate effectively with individuals and families (advanced)
Domain 2.5a: Demonstrate ability to build partnerships (advanced)
Domain 9.1c: Demonstrate professional identity formation (advanced))

COMPETENCY ALIGNMENT: AACN ESSENTIALS 2021

Progression level. 2 - Advanced Beginner

The case requires the student nurse to apply foundational skills in communication, empathy, and patient education, which are beyond entry-level but do not yet require full readiness for independent practice.

Domain 2: Person-Centered Care

Code	Competency	Rationale
2.1	Provide holistic, individualized care	The student nurse must address both the emotional and clinical needs of the patient, tailoring care to her specific situation and emotional state.
2.2	Engage with individuals, families, communities	The scenario involves engaging with the patient to understand her concerns and perspective, which is essential for effective person-centered care.
2.3	Incorporate patient preferences and values	The student nurse must consider the patient's perspective on her complications and integrate her values into the care plan.
2.4	Deliver compassionate, culturally responsive care	Providing empathy and support during the patient's distress requires compassion and an understanding of her cultural and personal context.

Domain 9: Professionalism

Code	Competency	Rationale
9.3	Practice self-awareness and reflection	The student nurse needs to be aware of their own emotional responses and reflect on their communication effectiveness to improve patient interactions.

Domain 10: Personal, Professional, and Leadership Development

Code	Competency	Rationale
10.4	Strengthen communication skills	The case focuses on developing the ability to communicate effectively and empathetically with patients, which is crucial for professional growth.

SIMULATION FORMAT

Platform	Figment ProFiles
Format	Single-character AI interview simulation
Synthesised voice	shimmer
Case first authored	July 2026

The interactive version of this case runs on the Figment ProFiles platform. This article is the archival record of its content at the time of publication.

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