

# Nursing and Interpersonal Sensitivity

## Kişilerarası Duyarlılık ve Hemşirelik

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### SUMMARY

Interpersonal sensitivity means being able to display appropriate behaviors and to perceive others accurately. However, if it is not used at an optimum level, it can cause problems in interpersonal relationships. High interpersonal sensitivity leads to feelings of inadequacy and humiliation, feeling unimportant and worthless and mistreated by others. It also leads to self-deprecation and over-monitoring of behaviors to reduce the risk of public rejection and criticism. When interpersonal sensitivity is very intense and makes the person become tender, it causes one to make mistakes when assessing and judging events and causes feelings of inadequacy in individuals. With increased interpersonal sensitivity, stereotyped thoughts are at the forefront. These thoughts lead to handicaps in performing roles and making decisions, difficulties in social relationships, disability in achieving goals, social withdrawal, and conflict. Becoming aware of cognitive distortions and stereotyped thoughts and displacing them with realistic ones can be helpful for keeping interpersonal sensitivity at an optimum level. Supporting self-esteem, focusing on individual successes, defining feasible goals, focusing on the strong personal characteristics, and providing effective use of social support systems are methods that can be used to decrease interpersonal sensitivity.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal sensitivity; nursing.

### ÖZET

*Kişilerarası duyarlılık, kişilerarası düzeyde başkalarını doğru olarak algılayabilme ve uygun davranışlar sergileyebilme olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Ancak optimum düzeyde olmadığı takdirde kişilerarası ilişkilerde sorunlara yol açabilmektedir. Kişilerarası duyarlılığın yüksek olması, bu bireylerde kişisel bir yetersizlik ve aşağılanma hissetme, diğerleri tarafından önemsenip değer verilmediğine ve kötü davranıldığına inanma, kendini diğerleriyle karşılaştığında daha aşağı görme, diğerlerinin yanında iken eleştirilme ve reddedilme riskini azaltmak için yanlış bir şeyler yapmamaya özen gösterme gibi yaşıntılara neden olmaktadır. Ayrıca, kişilerarası duyarlılığın hassasiyet düzeyinde yoğun olması, olayları değerlendirmede ve yorumlamada hatalara, bireyde kişisel olarak yetersizlik duygularına sebep olmaktadır. Artmış kişilerarası duyarlılıkta, kalıplaşmış düşünceler ön plandadır. Bu düşünceler rolleri yerine getirmede ve doğru karar almada kısıtlılıklara, sosyal ilişkilerde zorluklara, hedefleri gerçekleştirilmeye, geri çekilmeye ve çatışmaya neden olmaktadır. Kişilerarası duyarlılığı optimum düzeyde tutmak için bilişsel çarpıtmaların fark edilmesi ve gerçekçi düşüncelerle değiştirilmesi yararlı olmaktadır. Kişilerarası duyarlılığın azaltılması için bireyin benlik saygısının desteklenmesi, başarılarına odaklanılması, gerçekleştirilebilir hedefler konması, güçlü yönlerinin ön plana çıkartılması, sosyal destek sistemini etkin bir şekilde kullanımının sağlanması desteklenmelidir.*

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Kişilerarası duyarlılık; hemşirelik.*

### Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are a process in which individuals are mutually affected by each other. In the initiation, development and maintenance of these relationships, individuals' perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of events, situations and persons all play a major role.<sup>[1]</sup> Interpersonal relationships are formed within the framework of meaning attributed to persons by an individual through mutual interaction, and the opportunities given to the individual by those he/she cares about.<sup>[2]</sup> Thanks to these relationships, individuals get to know about and accept themselves and determine their strengths and weaknesses using the feedback they receive from others who enrich their lives. However, if a person

focuses excessively on interpersonal relationships, that person will have a decreased amount of time reserved only for himself/herself; other social relationships in his or her life will get weaker, and these relationships will become destructive. It may also cause discomfort and unhappiness when these relationships are terminated.<sup>[3]</sup>

Sensitivity in interpersonal relationships requires two basic developments that seem to be in contrast with each other. One of these developments is "being aware of the needs and feelings of others," and the other is "having the capability of offending easily". On the negative side, interpersonal sensitivity is described as a negative social evaluation where feelings of insufficiency are highlighted, including a sensitivity to the evaluations of others included, and these feelings are accompanied by an excessive and inappropriate sensitivity in the person.<sup>[4,5]</sup> A high level of interpersonal sensitivity makes a negative effect in the person, including indecisiveness, hopelessness, fragility, personal insufficiencies, exaggerating small problems, relationship difficulties, conflict avoidance, interpersonal stress, and a decreased level of tolerance. Due to these factors, high sensitivity in interpersonal relationships has a negative effect on the quality of these relationships.

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This is especially obvious in professions that include intense interpersonal relationships. Nursing is one of these professions. If nurses have optimum sensitivity in their interpersonal relationships, this will have a positive effect on the institution where they work, the people they provide service to, and the team they work with. Accordingly, when nurses have healthy interactions with the people they provide service to, as well as with the other members of the health care team, this increases job satisfaction and the quality of the service they provide.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **The Concept of Interpersonal Sensitivity and Relevant Factors**

Interpersonal sensitivity is a person's ability to make an accurate evaluation of other people's personality traits, feelings, thoughts, or intentions and developing an awareness in interpersonal relationships.<sup>[7,8]</sup> In other words, interpersonal sensitivity is an individual's ability to correctly perceive the interpersonal and social environment and give an appropriate response. As seen through these definitions, interpersonal sensitivity begins with feelings and perception.<sup>[9]</sup> Hoyle and Crenshaw (1997) report that the National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA) describes interpersonal sensitivity as the perception of the needs of others, being more thoughtful towards other people, working with others in emotionally stressful situations or conflicts, having the capability of conflict management, receiving feedback, being informed about cultural differences, and being in relationship with people from different origins.<sup>[10]</sup> Furthermore, Kenny (1999) suggests that it is possible to determine the level of interpersonal sensitivity, and in his study, it was effective that the person was able to observe and evaluate his or her own behaviors, being in agreement with other people and obtained the opinion of a person who he/she regarded as an expert.<sup>[11]</sup> Interpersonal sensitivity also includes emotional and social sensitivity. In this context, one of the sub-components of interpersonal sensitivity is emotional sensitivity, which is the ability to make an accurate determination of the meaning behind non-verbal clues using feelings; another sub-component is social sensitivity, which is being interested in global and social information such as personality and social role.<sup>[12]</sup>

In the evaluation of interpersonal sensitivity, researchers consider the individual's reactions to stimulants during interaction. When communicating, verbal stimulants are usually accompanied by non-verbal stimulants such as facial expressions and body language. In this context, interpersonal sensitivity is also described as accuracy in recognizing and recollecting others' non-verbal clues, content of speech, and physical appearance. When evaluating interpersonal sensitivity, additional elements are also taken into consideration, including mood or personality traits, accuracy and status or the level of intimacy between two people.<sup>[13,14]</sup>

When interpersonal sensitivity is high, it may cause problems in relationships and negatively affect emotional status. The relevant studies found a correlation between high interpersonal sensitivity and coping strategies focused on avoidance, including depression, anxiety, stress, social withdrawal, and self-treatment with alcohol and medication.<sup>[15-18]</sup> On the other hand, the results of some studies were conflicting, indicating that some individuals were positively affected by their low level of interpersonal sensitivity, which increased their self-confidence, while in other individuals, a high level of interpersonal sensitivity caused repetition of depression and anxiety episodes in persons who had been previously depressed, and it was cited as a risk factor for depression.<sup>[7,8,19]</sup> Self-management decreases when interpersonal sensitivity is high, while avoidance of negative situations increases.<sup>[20]</sup> Similarly, an increase in interpersonal sensitivity may affect a person's independence and self-confidence in interpersonal relationships. Individuals are divided into two categories based on independence and self-confidence in their relationships. These categories are autonomous and sociotropic. Sociotropic individuals feel stress over concerns of being rejected or abandoned, and they look for intimate emotional relationships. Autonomous individuals are self-confident and have strong self-management skills. A relevant study did not find any correlation between interpersonal sensitivity and autonomy, while it determined that interpersonal sensitivity increased in direct proportion with sociotropy.<sup>[21]</sup>

Interpersonal sensitivity is also correlated with self-esteem, which is described as an individual's evaluation of his or her own identity and existence.<sup>[16,22]</sup> As is widely known, self-esteem can be both positive and negative. People who have positive self-esteem also have positive interpersonal relationships, and they can easily face their negative characteristics when evaluating themselves.<sup>[23]</sup> People who have negative self-esteem experience more despair and feeling of valuelessness than those with positive self-esteem. They also have more problems in their social relationships. Having negative self-esteem may cause a lack of physiological and psychological wellness, avoiding discussions, social anxiety and high interpersonal sensitivity.<sup>[24]</sup> McCabe et al. found that there was a correlation between interpersonal sensitivity and low self-esteem.<sup>[25]</sup>

### **The Components of Interpersonal Sensitivity**

Boyce and Parker (1989), who were the first to suggest the concept of interpersonal sensitivity, said that this concept consisted of five components. These components are interpersonal awareness, the need for approval, separation anxiety, timidity, and fragile inner self. They act as a guide for a better understanding of the concept of sensitivity.<sup>[4]</sup>

Interpersonal awareness, one of these components, is

described as the impression that a person leaves on another person, along with sensitivity in interpersonal interaction. It leads to negative or critical responses such as “I care about what other people feel about me” and “I worry about what other people think about me,” as well as statements such as “I feel bad if someone criticizes what I do.” This component has an important correlation with low self-esteem, mood, and anxiety problems. Another component is the need for approval, and it includes displaying an easy-going behavior to provide unity in interpersonal relations, satisfying other people, doing what other people want, and being unable to reject others.<sup>[4]</sup> Separation anxiety is a person’s failure to separate in a secure way in his or her childhood and then having difficulties in adulthood due to this situation. This component is an important dimension of interpersonal sensitivity.<sup>[26]</sup> Separation anxiety also causes a tendency for depression. Timidity is another behavioral component of interpersonal sensitivity, and it is the failure to display impulsive behavior in interpersonal interactions. Finally, the fragile inner self is the component that reflects an important side of self-value that can be hidden from others and is disliked by the inner self.<sup>[4]</sup> These components of interpersonal sensitivity cause behavioral responses in individuals.

**Interpersonal Sensitivity and Behavioral Responses**

Interpersonal relationships can generate certain behavioral responses depending on the excessiveness of interpersonal sensitivity, taking responsibilities and failure in fulfilling these responsibilities.<sup>[27]</sup> These responses include integrated response, mechanical response, and secure response. In integrated response, the individual personalizes the behaviors in interpersonal relationships due to his or her excessive sensitivity and takes responsibility to reach the goals. In mechanical response, the person has no sense of responsibility or professionalism to reach the goal. Secure response includes only routine and programmed behaviors, and emotional responsi-

bility is limited. Another type of response is called independent interest. In this response, the person does not take any responsibility and an inner withdrawal is included.<sup>[27]</sup>

In interpersonal sensitivity, individuals’ methods of perceiving, making sense of, and interpreting events are as important as behavioral responses.

**The Correlation between Interpersonal Sensitivity and Making Solid Decisions**

The level of interpersonal sensitivity affects the meanings attributed to occurrences in interpersonal relationships. When interpersonal sensitivity is optimized, it positively affects the individual’s personal and interpersonal interactions as well as interactions with the social environment, and it helps the individual to make solid decisions. However, when this sensitivity exceeds the normal level and becomes excessive, it damages relationships, causes conflict, and makes decision-making more difficult. Bernieri (2001) recognized that interpersonal sensitivity at a certain level is very important in making decisions, which made him study individuals’ perceptions in this field. His study revealed that interpersonal sensitivity plays an important role in sound perception and interpretation. He also determined some categories and sample questions that help to create optimum interpersonal sensitivity, leading to sound perception and interpretation. These categories and sample questions are listed in Table 1.<sup>[13]</sup> If the questions in these categories are perceived and interpreted correctly, this shows that interpersonal sensitivity is present.

The intensiveness of interpersonal sensitivity causes individuals to make mistakes in evaluating and interpreting events and feelings of insufficiency in individuals. Stereotyped thoughts are highlighted in increased interpersonal sensitivity. These thoughts lead to restrictions in fulfilling roles and making solid decisions, difficulties in social relationships, failing to achieve goals, withdrawal, and conflicts. In order to keep interpersonal sensitivity at the optimum

**Table 1.** Indicator components of the formation of interpersonal sensitivity when the questions are perceived and interpreted correctly<sup>[13]</sup>

Categories	Sample questions
Characteristics	Does the perceiver recognize and remember the hairstyle of the target person?
Behaviors	Can the perceiver able to describe the gender, age, or education level of the target person?
Inner situations	Does the perceiver recognize the mood, attitude, or cognitions of the target person?
Interpersonal goals	Can the perceiver able to recognize that the target person wants to terminate the conversation or the interaction?
The Intention to deceive and the form of self-presentation	Can the perceiver detect a lie or tell when a target is self presenting and persuading?
Characteristics and inclinations	Can the perceiver able to describe the personality, motivation or competencies of the target person?
Social relationships	Can the perceiver able to recognize the boss and the people related to him or her?
Situation and cultural context	Can the perceiver able to recognize that a task or action is cooperative or competitive?
Fulfilling a role	Can the perceiver able to describe whether or not a person is suitable for a social role?
Future behaviors and their results	Can the perceiver able to anticipate how long the target person will maintain a role?

level, it is necessary to recognize cognitive distortions and replace them with realistic thoughts.

### **The Importance of Interpersonal Sensitivity in Nursing**

Nursing is one of the professions that requires individuals to interact with each other. Nurses' duties include perceiving, making decisions and attempts, reacting, and fulfilling responsibilities, as well as providing direct care to people<sup>[23,28]</sup>. Nurses provide patients with uninterrupted 24-hour service, they closely interact with other members of their team, and they have certain responsibilities. These responsibilities are to be professional, build effective interaction, and performing and managing their job duties.<sup>[29]</sup> Their patients will be more satisfied if nurses build healthy relationships when providing care and solve problems using their communication skills.<sup>[29-32]</sup> Nursing theoreticians Peplau and Travelbee claim that interpersonal relationships are the main structure of health care.<sup>[33]</sup> However, nurses sometimes have difficulties in the initiation, maintenance, and termination of interpersonal relationships. High levels of interpersonal sensitivity in nurses, health care team members or patients may play a role in these difficulties. High interpersonal sensitivity in nurses may prevent them from effectively solving problems with patients, patients' families, and other health care team members. In some situations, nurses are the ones that need help rather than being the ones that provide help. This reduces the quality of health care, hinders communication between team members, and decreases institutional productivity. For this reason, if nurses have an understanding of the concept of interpersonal sensitivity and evaluate themselves from this perspective, it will help them to better manage their interactions. Nurses who have a high level of interpersonal sensitivity should exert effort to optimize the level.

If a person has optimum interpersonal sensitivity, he or she will be psychologically healthy, able to build relationships based on trust, take responsibility, cope with stress effectively, and solve conflicts in a positive way. Thus, if nurses have optimum interpersonal sensitivity, this will have a positive effect on their interpersonal relationships and interactions, social functions, psychological health, and the general services they provide.<sup>[5,11,13]</sup> This will directly affect the people to whom nurses provide service, along with their families, the health care team, and the institution, which will in turn help to increase the quality of health care and patient satisfaction.

The relevant literature recommends interpersonal therapies, psychodrama, and psychodynamic and cognitive behavioral approaches in order to provide optimum interpersonal sensitivity.<sup>[34-36]</sup> For situations that include fragile inner self and high separation anxiety, the literature recommends psychodynamic approaches to develop the feeling of trust in

individuals.<sup>[34]</sup> Erözkan (2004) said that the development of the self can only be achieved through the development of interpersonal relationships, and the problems caused by the weakness of these relationships can be solved by cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive re-structuring, and ceasing thought.<sup>[35]</sup> Sapmaz (2011) determined that psychological group counseling focused on cognitive behavioral approach is effective in decreasing the level of interpersonal sensitivity.<sup>[36]</sup> If nurses are supported by regular counseling activities that include these recommended approaches, this will make a positive influence on their communicative characteristics and increase the quality of the health care they provide. To be able to provide health care service at the expected level, it is useful to determine nurses' interpersonal sensitivity levels, make appropriate recommendations to the nurses who do not have an optimum interpersonal sensitivity level, and encourage them to make use of therapeutic approaches.

**Results:** Nursing care is by nature based on the relationship and interactions between nurse and patient. Excessive sensitivity may make this interaction difficult, thereby damaging the relationship between nurses and patients, which interrupts health care in different ways. In cases of increased sensitivity, the individual has a fragile approach and feels insufficient. Increased interpersonal sensitivity in addition to stress caused by illness is especially difficult for patients and leads to a higher likelihood of psychological disorders such as depression that then extend the period of illness. Thus, high level of interpersonal sensitivity causes a variety of negative outcomes for both nurses and patients. For this reason, it is necessary that interpersonal sensitivity of both nurses and patients is kept at the optimum level. Optimum interpersonal sensitivity will have a positive reflection on nursing care, patient recovery processes, and the psychological health of both nurses and patients.

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