



# Emotional Intelligence and the Surgical Technologist

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*On a busy day in a surgical unit, two CSTs had a rough day. Both of them were placed in a room to work with a problematic surgical staff member. They both were belittled, sabotaged and verbally mistreated throughout a surgical procedure. One of the CSTs was emotionally intelligent and the other was not.*

**T**he one with no emotional intelligence got angry and reacted to the rude coworker's bullying and contemptuous remarks and unhelpful attitude in the same rude, sarcastic and defensive style which led to disruptive arguments during the procedure. The surgeon became upset and asked for the CST to be removed from the room and wrote him up for insubordination, unprofessional behavior and endangering the well-being of his patient. This surgical technologist reacted based on his emotions without rationalizing and monitoring his feelings.

At the end of the case, the surgeon thanked the CST for his assistance and professionalism when dealing with the disruptive co-worker. The surgeon requested for the CST to be assigned to his room on future surgeries. This CST recognized his emotions, monitored his response, then acted in an emotionally intelligent way.

Aristotle once stated that, "anybody can become angry – that is

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ▲ Define emotional intelligence
- ▲ Examine the four multidimensional domains that lay the foundation for EI skills
- ▲ Explore why emotional intelligence is needed in the role of a surgical technologist
- ▲ Discuss the benefits of mastering emotional intelligence
- ▲ List the consequences of poor or limited EI skills in the OR

easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.” That is called Emotional Intelligence (EI).

It is undeniable that the operating room is characterized by being an aggressive and a complex work environment where emotional intelligence serves as the buffer to help mediate through problems caused by rivalry, passive aggressive attitudes and behaviors, insecurities, insensitivities, and overly sensitive personalities. Researchers have suggested that people with top levels of EI bring balanced emotions to the environment. The good news is that emotional intelligence is an acquired skill and everyone can make the choice to modify his or her mindset and demeanors to enhance these skills.

#### UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI)

Since its inception, several definitions have been given to emotional intelligence and the simplest description one can offer is the “human skills to manage and regulate one’s own emotions, impulses and feelings.” Nonetheless, EI is a key component of personal well-being, interpersonal relationships, and success in life. EI has its roots in the concept called “Social Intelligence” explored by American psychologist and adult learning researcher Edward Thorndike in the 1920s, who originally described it as the “ability to get along with others.” Subsequently, emotional intelligence was officially coined in 1990 by Peter Salovey and Jack Mayer, both human behavioral researchers, and popularized by Daniel Goleman in 1995.

Today, EI is predominantly studied in clinical, behavioral, social and organizational psychology to better understand the dynamics of human behavior and interactions among each other. Top tier studies suggested those who possess high levels of EI are equipped with a robust self-control, empathy, upmost levels of interpersonal skills and the purpose of achieving a constructive and productive outcome. Emotional intelligent people are typically well-adjusted, warm, persistent, and are able to handle difficult or stressful situations in life. On the other hand, Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso (2000) sustained that people who lack emotional intelligence also lack of the inability to: lever distressing emotions, which can cripple them from successfully engaging in constructive relationships; work as a team; carry on

tasks under stress and pressure; lead effectively; make accurate and sound decisions; manage struggles with coworkers; and control their emotions.

Since emotional intelligence involves multidimensional domains at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, this function is only successfully achieved through self-reflection

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(intrapersonal), and the individual’s ability to examine and understand other people’s feelings in order to work well in cooperation with others (interpersonal). That entails the individual’s understanding and ability to form an accurate portrait of one’s self, connected to the ability to perceive and manage own emotions and feelings, and other people’s feelings. In other words, emotional intelligence comprises of a “set of mental and spoken abilities” and brings together intellect and emotions, where intelligence is the higher-level controlling power regulating moods, emotional perceptions and verbal expressions to discriminate one’s own feelings based on each individual circumstance. The ability to master these skills gives an individual powerful tools to transform negative situations into positive and constructive outcomes and solve problems.

#### EI AND THE SURGICAL TEAM

The concept of EI is a hot topic in today’s society. Corporate leaders have begun to realize of the importance of emotional intelligence among their personnel and have included assessments measuring emotional intelligence levels when hiring employees or enrolling students into their school programs.

The operating room as a branch of medicine, hosts diverse clinical personnel. These healthcare professionals work closely as part of a team to serve patients and members of their families. The surgical staff must display compassion, empathy, patience, all while interpreting and understanding the patient’s feelings. Therefore, it is vital for them to

exhibit appropriate professional behavior in any given situation; able to work in collaboration with each other; abide ethical principles and have a thorough understanding of the differences in culture, opinions, feelings and various ways of doing things; and get along despite of their personal differences, whether in the role of a surgical technologist, circulating nurse, surgeon or anesthesiologist, etc. In order for them to act productively, they must appreciate that personality traits and behavioral factors that play a significant role in the functionality of the work environment.

## EI IN THE ROLE OF THE SURGICAL TECHNOLOGIST

### *Why emotional intelligence is needed in the role of a surgical technologist*

Dealing with different personalities is particularly a job in itself. Emotions are usually stirred up during social interactions within the operating room. Frustration, irritation and disappointment are common feelings that deter an individual's ability to work as part of a team. Despite how well-trained surgical technologists are, oftentimes they find themselves caught in the midst of unexpected unpleasant situations, personality issues, lack of respect, disagreements, rivalry, antagonistic team members, emotional burnout, verbal abuse, bullying, and other conflicting behaviors.

CSTs must display excellent work performance throughout the entire surgical process, as well as maintain professionalism, focus and effective communication with other team members regardless of personal issues. To cope with the natural challenges of this profession, EI components of self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and effective social skills are greatly needed. Otherwise, CSTs would not be able to interact with each other appropriately, nor deliver the utmost patient care.

### *How to increase emotional intelligence skills in the role of surgical technology?*

Any experienced CST knows that the outcome of surgery rests not only in his or her surgical knowledge and skills, but also in the CST's character and ability to keep calm regardless of how they feel. Given the nature of teamwork, the most basic building blocks seem to be discipline, empathy, tolerance, collaboration, solidarity, flexibility, focusing on team efforts, problem solving, effective communication, trust, interpersonal and social skills. The downside of working with different people is that people often run into problems due to differences of opinion, rivalry, negative attitudes, greed, betrayal and discouragement. Understanding

that teamwork is unnatural in human behavior takes one to intentionally implement strategies to improve emotional intelligence skills and learn to take control over negative situations in order to work well with others. It is imperative to learn that emotional intelligence is not just the ability to suppress emotions, but an intentional attitude that requires a more systematic approach when connecting with other human beings.

Daniel Goleman published in 1998 his research "EI-Based Theory of Performance," where he identified four multidimensional domains that reflect specific competences an individual must contemplate to exceedingly master emotional intelligence skills:

*Emotional self-awareness* is key to teamwork development and a necessary skill to handling stress. Self-awareness acts as a mirror giving one the ability to recognize, comprehend, interpret, articulate and reflect on one's own feelings. Individuals with a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, and weakness tend to be mindful of one's own triggers and effects, are more confident in making decisions, have higher self-appraisal and personal growth. Goleman stated that individuals who exhibit high levels of emotional awareness and ponder on their feelings tend to be more conscious of their actions and are more adaptable and trustworthy, which in return improves social interaction skills and relationship management.

Self-awareness can be developed through self-reflection and with additional ongoing feedback from people's opinion who one trusts. The more accurately individuals are able to identify and monitor their emotions, the sooner they can improve handling themselves under stress. Becoming more aware of one's emotions is a skill that requires the intention to modify one's thought process to alter behavior. Consequently, as an alternative of reacting or making decisions impulsively following one's feelings, whether out of anger or happiness, individuals will have to teach themselves to rise above their emotional states to maintain a productive and beneficial outcome for the team and the patient.

*Self-management* is the ability to regulate and monitor one's emotional distress such as fear, anxiety, anger, impulsivity, pain, suffering, etc. Once an individual is aware of their feelings, the next step is taking self-control. By doing this, individuals learn to deescalate or step away from a dispute, act in proportion of the circumstance, assess and rationalize one's response or action, and initiate responsibility and effective communication.

Mastering self-management is similar to driving a car. If one steps on the accelerator and lets the steering wheel go on its own, the car will end up crashing at some point. Taking control of one's emotional steering wheel will give the individual the power to accelerate or decelerate his or her emotions according to the direction he or she desires to take. This action impacts an individual's words and actions to achieve a more beneficial outcome and provides them with a healthy motivation that supports the surgical team and its patients.

*Social Awareness.* This domain is built primarily on care and understanding for others. Individuals that score high in social awareness display the ability to decode nonverbal prompts for harmful reactions, motives, anger, fear, and the ability to judge if other people are dependable or not. In turn, individuals will be able to control their thoughts, pause before verbalizing one's own ideas, and respond, praise and recognize other people's worth and more.

Refining social skills is work for everyone. These skills go above and beyond being a people pleaser, being a great hostess or the life of the party. It entails a legitimate attitude to listening and paying close attention to other people's emotions, needs and concerns, being mindful about the way an

individual interacts with others and taking control of one's words before answering.

*Relationship Management or Social Skills.* This ability is founded and braced on the other domains of EI, predominantly on self-management and social awareness. The inability to control anger and impulses and the lack of empathy deters the effectiveness in developing or maintaining relationships. In fact, building and preserving healthy relationships is nothing more than the direct results of mastering awareness in all the above-mentioned domains. This ability empowers an individual with the essential tools to successfully monitor relationships, while self-awareness and self-monitoring helps to identify one's relationships needs.

### BENEFITS OF MASTERING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Research has conceded that high levels of EI enables improved communication skills, reduces anxiety and stress, aids in resolving quandaries, enhances relationships, allows individuals to understand others, promotes emotional well-being, and effectively contributes to overcome life's challenges. Moreover, EI directly impacts a surgical technologist's

**FIG. # 1: A FRAMEWORK OF EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES**

Table extracted from Goleman D, (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*

	<b>SELF</b> Personal Competence	<b>OTHER</b> Social Competence
<b>RECOGNITION</b>	<b>SELF-AWARENESS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional self-awareness</li> <li>• Accurate self-assessment</li> <li>• Self-confidence</li> </ul>	<b>SOCIAL AWARENESS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Service orientation</li> <li>• Organizational awareness</li> </ul>
<b>REGULATION</b>	<b>SELF-MANAGEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-control</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Conscientiousness</li> <li>• Adaptability</li> <li>• Achievement drive</li> <li>• Initiative</li> </ul>	<b>RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing others</li> <li>• Influence</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Conflict management</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Change catalyst</li> <li>• Building bonds</li> <li>• Teamwork &amp; collaboration</li> </ul>

performance in the operating room by adding powerful traits to her or her personality, thus boosting their professional image.

*Better team players.* Employees with high levels of EI are more apt to communicate well, share ideas and openly listen to others, and are less likely to engage in disputes or take control of a situation arrogantly by dismissing other team members. Consequently, these individuals also are more pleasant to work with. Hillary Elfenbein (2006) stated that the higher the emotional intelligence skills among team players, the higher the team functions. In her examination of emotional intelligence, she concluded that people with EI make stronger team members. She referred to these individuals as being more focused on bringing solutions to the problem and creating a constructive environment to increase team performance and productivity. They are interested in becoming more competent in their field of work rather than competing against each other, and are thoughtful and respectful of other people's roles and ideas.

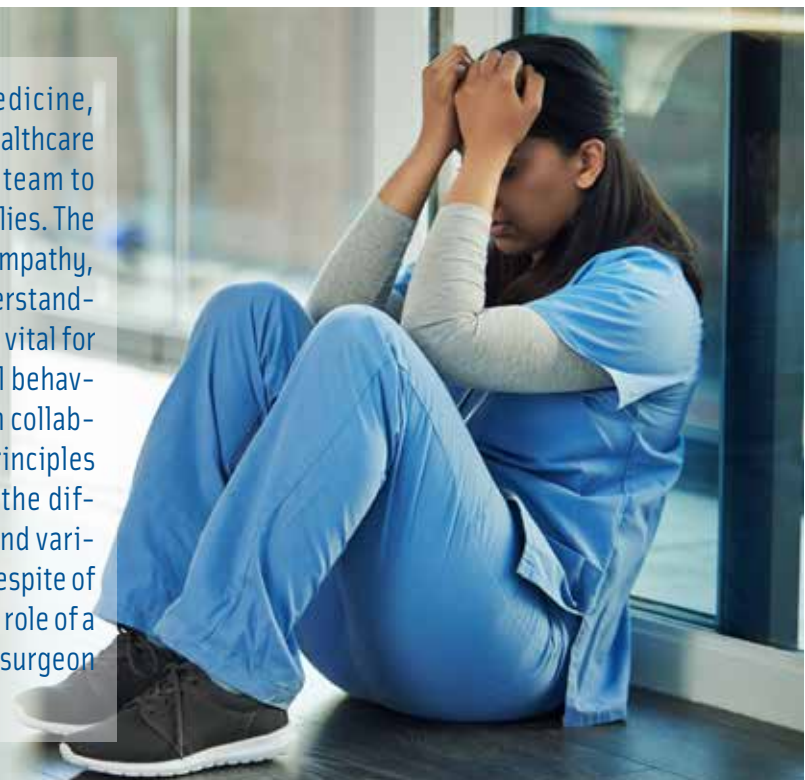
*Advanced professional ethics and surgical conscience.* In addition to being nice and having a great working attitude, a CST must possess integrity. Team members not only will enjoy working with these individuals, but they also will trust and display confidence in their work. CSTs with high levels

of emotional intelligence are naturally trustworthy, display mature rational and accountability, possess robust surgical conscience, and are unparalleled contributors in building an ethical work environment.

*More pliable to sudden changes.* As humans, having an open mind is imperative in order to adapt to the surgical environment. For the most part, the operating room is a controlled environment where staff follows a set of specific standards, procedures and principles to limit liability and risks. On the other hand, the operating room setting is also susceptible to sudden changes due to unexpected circumstances; hence, it is important for surgical technologists to adapt to these changes, manage their emotions under pressure, think outside the box to brainstorm creative solutions and solve immediate problems without running into conflicts with peers. Although everyone in the OR understands that changes are a part of the daily routine, not everyone adapts well to abrupt changes. Research suggests that employees that uses high levels of EI effortlessly adjust to a particular unexpected situation with much less struggle than those who possess less emotional intelligence because their central focus is finding solutions to problems while maintaining harmony in the team member's interactions.

*More self-awareness.* Often times people are oblivious of

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their own mistakes and limitations, and become defensive when someone makes an observation. This lack of understanding can render productivity and frustration. The most valuable benefit of emotional intelligence is the capacity to understand one's own character, feelings, motives, strengths, weaknesses and desires. CSTs with high emotional intelligence are equipped to learn from their own mistakes, take positive criticism and use it constructively to boost their personal and professional growth without becoming offended.

*Better leadership capabilities.* EI skills can serve as a moral compass and better equip individuals to lead effectively, manage anger and efficiently deal with difficult people. Surgical technologists have the opportunity to become suc-

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cessful leaders. Circulating nurses, surgeons, students and new staff greatly depend on a surgical technologist's knowledge and experience. With the fast-emerging associates degree in surgical technology and a few years of experience, surgical technologists may transition to higher levels within the surgical arena and become operating room coordinators, manage surgical teams, or lead as facilitators for a particular specialty. Surgical technologists also have the opportunity to lead educators, clinical specialists at medical corporations, as well as program administrators, or top tier executives for a university. To do all this successfully, surgical technologists must possess significant amounts of emotional intelligence to effectively lead with care and compassion.

*More self-control over difficult people and stressful situations.* Conflicts among coworkers are frequently triggered by petty issues. Emotional intelligence equips individuals with the skills to handle tough situations and problematic people. Every surgical unit has at least one or more unhappy, toxic co-worker who complains all the time, who knows it all, who constantly sabotages or mocks and condemns coworkers just to make themselves look good in front of others. Working close to these individuals is irritating and handling conflict is relatively difficult because these coworkers activate acute

stress within individuals and excites one's "fight" or "flight" response.

Using emotional intelligence when interacting with toxic coworkers means remaining calm and by taking control of one's emotions and behaviors, and establishing ground rules based on mutual respect. Understanding that conflict is a natural part of human relations is important to find a common ground.

Mastering one's self-awareness, self-control and social interaction will allow an individual to make rational statements, ask pertinent questions, understand the situation, acknowledge the other person's emotions and individual's motivations.

#### CLEAR SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Developing strong self-awareness and the ability to self-regulate one's own behavior and feelings are winning one half of the battle. Social and relationship management competencies are central for interaction with other people. However, these skills go beyond being a social person, getting along with everyone, or becoming a "very likeable" person who

pleases everyone. Constructive social skills demand more from the individual and are entrenched with specific intrapersonal qualities.

- *Well-developed critical thinking*, which is the ability to objectively without biases evaluate the facts to form a correct judgment. A surgical technologist must be able to read into situations not only to anticipate the surgical needs of the case, but also to navigate surgical team members' behaviors, motivations and intentions, and interpret them correctly to anticipate, manage, and prevent potential issues that may generate conflicts.
- *Tolerance* is the individual's ability to accept and understand human nature, and to respect other people's ideas, beliefs, culture, values and behaviors. A tolerant attitude is a great indicator of high levels of emotional intelligence. It is the building block, a critical element and a desirable quality in teamwork and cannot be underscored enough in the surgical unit.
- *Ability to forgive*. Although this can be a difficult task, the ability to forgive symbolizes the core of emotional intelligence. Understanding human nature and rationalizing people's motivations for doing the things they do may not help much with the ability to forgive. However, hold-

ing grudges is unhealthy and only increases stress, collision of personalities, and tarnish one's image and performance. An inability to forgive a person after an insult or betrayal will only cause more emotional damage. Choosing forgiveness requires the capacity to move beyond the insult and present emotions. Forgiveness releases you from past emotional wounding experiences and helps you focus on what really matters.

- *Ability to pause and control thinking before speaking.* Another indispensable quality of emotional intelligence is the ability to realize that emotions can trigger impulsive decisions that may lead to speaking out in anger and making things worse. Pausing and reorganizing one's thoughts before speaking is a titanic endeavor, but emotionally intelligent people recognize the need of self-control, the need to think before acting or speaking, and conveying respect through using an appropriate tone of voice.
- *Enjoy a happier life.* One thing is for certain – After a long day of work in the operating room, satisfactions and frustrations collected from the day's work will not only impact one's work performance, but also affect one's personal lives and interactions within his or her environment. Szczygiel & Mikolajczak (2017) correlated emotional intelligence to life satisfaction and happiness. Their analyses indicated that people with high emotional intelligent traits tend to intentionally avoid feeling dampened when dealing with frustration or discouragement, and instead they choose to implement positive strategies to change situations by focusing on events that really matter and bring happiness and satisfaction to their lives based on their own personal gains.

## CONCLUSION

Typically, operating room personnel have learned to work in collaboration no matter how dissimilar they might be. But for many reasons, disappointment, resentment and distress can easily arise during tense circumstances. Handling one's emotions may seem unmanageable at times when in fact, facing this challenge is a matter of choosing to understand and channeling one's feelings and motives to construct positive outcomes. In an era of indifference and self-sufficiency, where rapid social and media changes are the norm, people frequently feel disconnected from other people's needs and feelings.

Yet, those who embrace emotional intelligence as part of their routine behavior become more effective team players, have healthier relationships among colleagues, and create group synergy. Imagine a surgical team that cares not only about the patient, but each other at a personal and professional level. These types of teams are more likely to succeed than those who compete against

each other. The cohesiveness of the team has a profound influence on the relationship of all its members and it is echoed in the excellence of the work they produce.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jorge A Zamudio, CST, graduated as a surgical technologist from Bergen Community College in 1995 and has worked as a traveler CST for 18 years. He is currently a surgical technologist program director and works as an assistant professor and director of the surgical technology program at Kingsborough Community College. He holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in organizational leadership. He is additionally credentialed as an anger management and conflict resolution, civil mediation and crisis intervention specialist. He has additionally completed studies in mental health, human services and addiction counseling in the state of New Jersey.

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# Emotional Intelligence and the Surgical Technologist

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1. **An American psychologist initially described emotional intelligence in what decade?**
  - a. 1880s
  - b. 1900s
  - c. 1920s
  - d. 1950s
2. **When did EI start to become a more popular and mainstream term?**
  - a. 1990
  - b. 1995
  - c. 2000
  - d. 2005
3. **The key to teamwork development and a necessary skill to handling stress is defined as:**
  - a. Emotional self-awareness
  - b. Self-management
  - c. Social awareness
  - d. Relationship management
4. **Which of the following aspect of EI is founded and based on the other domains of EI?**
  - a. Social awareness
  - b. Relationship management
  - c. Emotional self-awareness
  - d. Self-management
5. **Research show that high levels of EI enables which of the following:**
  - a. Improved communication skills
  - b. Enhances relationship
  - c. Promotes well-being
  - d. All of the above
6. **True or False: Tolerance is a one of the clear signs of emotional intelligence.**
  - a. True
  - b. False
7. **Which characteristic is the ability to regulate and monitor one's emotional distress?**
  - a. Self-awareness
  - b. Social awareness
  - c. Self-management
  - d. Relationship management
8. **In 2006, a researcher found that the higher emotional intelligence allowed for \_\_\_\_\_.**
  - a. Advanced surgical conscience
  - b. Better team players
  - c. More self-awareness
  - d. All of the above
9. **In Daniel Goldman's 1998 published research "EI-Based Theory of Performance," he identified how many multidimensional domains that reflect specific competences an individual must contemplate to master EI skills?**
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
10. **In 2017, researchers correlated emotional intelligence to an individual's \_\_\_\_\_.**
  - a. Well being
  - b. Confidence
  - c. Happiness
  - d. Self-control

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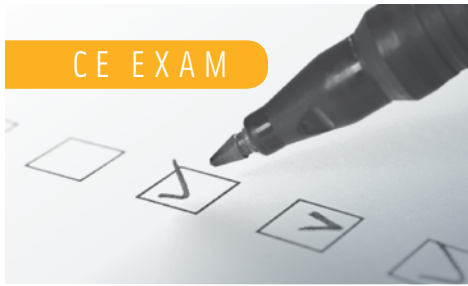
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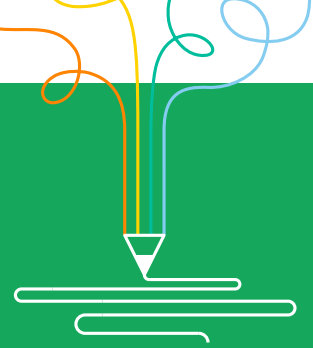
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