

# Self-Care of Physicians Caring for Patients at the End-of-life

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4.15.09*

## 2 syndromes of clinician stress:

- Burnout
- Compassion Fatigue

# Burnout

Burnout results from stresses that arise from the clinician's interaction with the work environment

# Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue evolves specifically from the relationship between the clinician and the patient

### 3 Key Dimensions of Burnout: Maslach et al.

- Overwhelming physical and emotional exhaustion
- *Depersonalization*: feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job
- A sense of ineffectiveness and lack of personal accomplishment

## 6 Major Organizational Antecedents of Burnout

- Workload
- Control
- Reward
- Community
- Fairness
- Values

*“The greater the mismatch between the [clinician] and the work environment, the greater is the likelihood of burnout. A better match or fit is associated with greater engagement with work.”*

Maslach et al. 2001

## Individual symptoms and signs of burnout

- Poor judgment
- Over-identification or over-involvement
- Boundary violations
- Perfectionism and rigidity
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Addictive behaviors
- Frequent illness – headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, immune system impairment
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Questioning prior religious beliefs

## Team/group symptoms and signs of burnout

- Low morale
- High job turnover
- Impaired job performance (decreased empathy, increased absenteeism)
- Staff conflicts

## Compassion Fatigue

“The cost of caring” for others in emotional pain: AKA “secondary traumatic stress.”

Here the clinician suffers trauma symptoms by vicariously experiencing another’s suffering

# Symptoms and signs of compassion fatigue

## ***Increased Arousal***

- Irritability and hyper-vigilance

## ***Re-experiencing***

- Intrusive thoughts and dreams

## ***Avoidance***

- Avoidance of emotionally difficult clinical situations

- In these conceptualizations and definitions of compassion fatigue empathic engagement is seen as a key causal factor and a liability

*“The caregiver’s empathy level with the traumatized individual plays a significant role in this transmission”*

Figley, 1995

## Established self-care strategies

- Adequate supervision and mentoring
- Sustainable workload
- Promotion of feelings of choice and reward
- Supportive work community
- Promotion of fairness and justice in the workplace
- Training in communication skills
- Continuing educational activities
- Participation in research
- The practice of self-care activities

## Some shared philosophical assumptions about self-care:

- Importance of clear professional boundaries
- The value of developing self-care activities (mainly outside the workplace)
- That this is an individual's responsibility

## We suggest self-care strategies more likely to be successful if:

- Combined with clinician self-awareness (presented here as a cognitive skill and a “meta” self-care strategy— I will say more about this shortly)
- Seen as a *joint* responsibility of individual and organization
- Recognized as a good business strategy with potential benefits for clinicians, patients, and the organization

## Self-awareness

Defined as self-knowledge and the development of dual-awareness;

*a stance that permits the clinician to simultaneously attend to and monitor the needs of the patient and/or the work environment and his or her own subjective experience*

## In our paper we refer to a qualitative study by Harrison and Wellwood:

- Which looked at a group of peer-nominated, exemplary mental health therapists who were thriving in their work with traumatized clients
- They identified a variety of protective practices that enhance caregiver's professional satisfaction and help prevent or mitigate compassion fatigue
- In particular, they noted that trauma therapists who engaged in what they called *exquisite empathy* were “invigorated rather than depleted by their intimate professional connections with traumatized clients and protected against compassion fatigue and burnout”

## Exquisite empathy:

- Highly present
- Sensitively attuned
- Well-boundaried and
- Heartfelt empathic engagement

*“The practice of exquisite empathy is facilitated by clinician self-awareness ...”*

*Harrison and Westwood, 2009*

## Exquisite empathy

- It is clear that Ex Em is a form of clinical practice that is beneficial for *both* clinician and patient
- An “in-situ” self-care practice. However, we suggest
- Relevance goes beyond the clinical
- Describes a mode of relationship that is egalitarian and respectful
- Also beneficial to relationships with peers and colleagues throughout the organization

## Some methods of enhancing self-awareness

- Supervision/Mentoring
- Peer Group Support
- Sharing our stories of challenging situations
- Educational initiatives
- Research initiatives
- Psychotherapy
- Spiritual direction
- **Mindfulness meditation**
- **Reflective writing**

# Mindfulness Meditation

- Mindfulness Meditation refers to a process of developing careful attention to minute shifts in body, mind, emotions, and one's environment, while holding a kind, non-judgmental attitude toward self and others
- MM has been shown to reduce stress, develop dual awareness, and increase self-compassion, a sense of well-being, and empathy for others

## Shapiro et al. describe:

- A matched, randomized trial examined the impact of an 8-week mindfulness-based intervention on medical and premedical students
- The mindfulness group reported significantly less depression and anxiety, and greater empathy, compared to a wait-list control group
- Despite the fact that the post-intervention data acquisition coincided with the participants' school examinations

Shapiro S, Astin J, Bishop S, Cordova M. Mindfulness-based stress reduction for health care professionals: Results from a randomized trial. *Intern J Stress Manag.* 2005; 12(2): 164-176.

# Reflective Writing

- Writing in a reflective and emotionally expressive way is another form of self-care that enhances self-awareness
- There are demonstrated somatic and psychological benefits to this practice
- Has been extended to promote reflection and empathic engagement in clinicians

## For example:

- Charon has introduced a method called “parallel charting” in medical training that involves medical students recording their personal thoughts and feelings in a journal in “parallel” to the objective clinical data they document in the patients’ medical records
- The students then meet on a regular basis to read their accounts to each other

*“When you write, you often discover not only what the patient is thinking and feeling, but what you are thinking and feeling”*

*Rita Charon*

## Some benefits of self-awareness based self-care

### *For the clinician*

- Ability to remain present to another's suffering
- Ability to recognize when one is "at one's limits"
- Ability to recognize when work is adversely affecting one's health, and personal and professional relationships
- Ability to know what one needs to do to regenerate oneself

## Some benefits of self-awareness based self-care

### *For the patient*

- “Exquisite empathy”
- A clinician who is present, empathic, and effective

## Some benefits of self-awareness based self-care

### *For the organization*

- Increased staff retention/reduced absenteeism
- Increased employee morale/job satisfaction
- Reduced employee conflicts
- Employees who are present, empathic, effective
- Increased patient and family satisfaction

## What can be done at an organizational level to implement these findings?

- Realize that BO and CF are (a) COMMON (b) DIFFERENT
- Realize that investment in clinician self-awareness and self-care is sound business strategy: benefits staff, clients, and the health-care organization
- Acknowledge that self-care is a joint responsibility between organization and employees
- Have employees complete a “self-care” inventory
- Support self-awareness based self-care practices in the workplace e.g. clinical supervision/mentoring; peer support groups; Mindfulness Meditation training; a reflective writing group; educational initiatives; counseling services; AND FINALLY ...
- Understand that self-care practices can be woven into the fabric of clinical practice in simple and effective ways to the benefit of all

## Perspectives on Care at the End-of-Life:

- 9 years
- JAMA has published 42 “Perspectives” articles; 23 codas
- Work has commenced to bring these all together in a book ...

## Special thanks to:

- Margaret Winker of JAMA
- Steve McPhee and colleagues at the University of California, San Francisco
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- California Healthcare Foundation
- Archstone Foundation
- The Institute for Healthcare Improvement

## Special thanks to:

- Radhule Weininger MD, PhD
- Mary Vachon RN, PhD
- Richard Harrison PhD
- Balfour Mount MD