How to Protect Our Heroes: Preventing Healthcare Provider Burnout during a Worldwide Pandemic

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As a healthcare professional, you sacrificed by pursuing years of higher education and completing difficult training. All this sacrifice has shaped your personal resilience and mental toughness; characteristics that help you provide an essential health service to society. Patients regularly seek and require your services during their time of need, which is often unplanned, creating a unique situation for both patient and provider. The emotional anxiety, anger, denial or uncertainty displayed by patients are warranted and very tangible in context. However, patients can unwittingly expose healthcare providers to these occupational hazards that, ironically, cannot be deflected by even the best personal protective equipment.

The first step to protect against psychological occupational hazards is to recognize and define what burnout is. The psychological impact from job-related stressors can be displayed in different ways such as through physical or emotional exhaustion, disparagement of others and limited work efficiency. Experiencing and observing life altering healthcare services over a prolonged period will take its toll; you can't escape.

Repetitive stress at work surrounding the accuracy of information about the virus, possible lack of personal protective equipment or spreading the virus are just a few examples of how real life concerns can impact your ability to perform high quality care for your patient. New hurdles that we are all experiencing in 2020 are decreased social support and human connection. Maintaining social distancing creates (and even exacerbates) mental health issues. For example, individuals may avoid healthcare settings due to fear of the virus or they may rationalize delaying care because their issues are “not critical enough.”

With increased caseloads, double-shifts and critical care patients; your emotional health is literally on the line with each passing day. We know how the impact and overall burden of burnout can be personally and professionally damaging. For example, decreased patient satisfaction and quality of care are resulting in higher employee turnover within the healthcare system.

So what can you do right now to manage and prevent burnout as a healthcare provider?

1. Identify first!
   Regardless of your specialty area, all healthcare providers make patient assessments and determine a course of action or plan for them based on how they present and what contributing variables exist. Simply inverse this skill inward and gauge yourself.
Let’s call it the process of taking your emotional vitals:

- Are you able to concentrate?
- Are you having trouble sleeping?
- Are you experiencing constant anxiety or uncertainty?
- Do you feel irritable?
- Are you depressed or feeling helpless?

2. **Second, be prepared for the basics**
   Have all the proper equipment that you need to perform your job safely. There is no need to unnecessarily expose your own health and families’ health when personal protective equipment is readily available. Have a contact within your healthcare organization for questions regarding accessing appropriate personal protective equipment.

3. **Have workplace guidance**
   Company policies and procedures should be regularly updated and be specific to role/job function. These reference tools are essential for when questions come up.

4. **Know your benefits**
   Work has always been stressful in some form. Today work stress is compounded by many environmental factors such as the current worldwide pandemic, many travel restrictions, toxic political rhetoric, and financial uncertainty. These external variables cannot be controlled. The majority of employer benefits include a confidential 24/7 hotline for counseling, typically at no additional cost. This is a benefit that should definitely be utilized as an outlet during these trying times.

5. **Time management**
   Healthcare providers do not always have a consistent daily routine, nor do they go home because the clock finally says 5pm. Typically they wait until the patient is transferred, safe and stable before calling it a day. It is important to take those much-needed breaks to rest, eat lunch and take a breather because our bodies need to recharge and recalibrate to optimally function. Colleagues, coworkers and friends should not be ignored just because of a 6-foot social distancing precaution. Virtual or outdoor settings are great alternatives to high risk/close contact areas when you want to communicate and spend time with others.

6. **Don’t forget to care for yourself**
   Staying grounded and healthy is more than just a nice philosophical theory; it needs to become integrated into your life. Shutting off the seemingly never-ending buzzing phone for just a short period, can dramatically enhance one’s mindfulness and self-reflection. We all know it works, but often are too intimidated to click that scary button and shut down the device. Healthcare
providers more than ever need to lead by example and practice what they preach. Eat well, exercise on a routine basis, get enough quality sleep and control what you can, not what you can’t.

References:


https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-preparedness

https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/healthcare/default.html