



LONG TERM CARE: COVID-19 SERIES

Session 10: Burn Out and Resiliency Question & Answers

Disclaimer: All information is provided by healthcare providers working in long-term care facilities across Ontario including those at Baycrest. All identifying information including names of individuals, organizations, or locations have been removed for privacy. **The answers below are amalgamated responses from our Hub team members and Learning Partners.**

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Question 1: Can you talk about dealing with toxic relationships, practices, or expectations at work that contribute to burn out?

Answer: I know for myself, it's important to ground yourself in your core values. I think what happens a lot in these environments is the way we are spending our time and what we are needing to put our energy towards doesn't always match our core values. For example, if I have a core value for harmony, it's really important for myself that people get along, and if people aren't, then what can I do to create more harmony. What I can do is in my control because I think so often, especially when we are feeling burnt out, is that we tend to focus on the things that are outside our control. So being able to look at who are our allies in this situation and see whether we can work through some of the toxicity.

I talked about the idea of needing to recharge our batteries so that we aren't pulling energy from our reserve and I think the things we do to recharge our batteries outside of work so that we are able to manage those toxic situations better.

Question 2: You mentioned exhaustion in your presentation and how it related to trouble sleeping. I was wondering if sleeping more but not feeling rested also a sign of burn out?

Answer: Absolutely! I know for a lot of people there's ties between depression and anxiety with burn out. So when we look at something like depression, even if someone isn't diagnosed with depression but are showing signs, it can sometimes show pattern shifts in some way either sleeping too much or too little, and same goes with our relationship with food where our appetite may show similar pattern shifts to our sleep as it relates to burn out in a similar fashion as it occurs with depression or anxiety.

With sleeping let's say 10 hours yet still feeling fatigued, it may be an indication that the quality of sleep is poor. So it's important to look at what sort of things we can do to prepare for sleep to make it as restful as possible. We all know the things we should avoid or do in order to have that more restful sleep, but we don't always follow them. It may be that we are looking at our screens before bed for instance that may be preventing us from having a restful sleep.

Even when we feel tired, I think it's helpful to be gentle with ourselves and accept the reality that these are tiring times, and in the best of conditions this work can be exhausting.

Question 3: Evidently blue light that emits from our screens can be quite fatiguing to the eyes and the mind so this can explain why having back to back virtual meetings are so tiring. Has anyone figured out how to combat this?

Answer: There are also blue light glasses you can buy. I'm not sure about prescription glasses with blue light filter, but I personally wear contact lenses then have glasses with a blue light filter to help minimize my exposure to blue light.

I've heard this as well and during meetings I like to encourage people to turn on their video because it's helpful for me to stay engaged as I can read people's expressions. Also last week, someone mentioned



the rules of 20s where an ophthalmologist suggested for those of us that are in front of screens all day for work, that every 20 minutes to look 20 feet away (preferably outside) for 20 seconds. That is shown to help minimize the fatigue of our eyes being focused on the screen for long periods of time.

My understanding is that for the reticular activating system, it's good to have exposure to blue light during the mornings and to avoid it in the evenings before bed.

Question 4: Can you speak more about the importance of having self-compassion?

Answer: I think a lot of us don't really know how to show compassion to ourselves. Most of us were drawn to the field of healthcare because being compassionate to others comes naturally and we tend to be "other" focused. We know the elements of compassion, but when it comes to being able to give ourselves permission to be compassionate to ourselves and to put ourselves first, this doesn't come naturally to most of us. Often times it may be viewed that showing self-compassion is indulgent or selfish, and it's not that at all. A good way to look at it is to speak to yourself as you would talking to somebody that you care about. So making that mindset shift can make a big difference in being more resilient and preventing burn out.

One thing I would like to point out that many healthcare workers work under a code of ethics that it's important to take care of yourself in order to better provide care to others. It is counterintuitive to feel guilty about taking care of ourselves and to sacrifice self-care because we may be doing a disservice to those we care for if we allow ourselves to get burnt out. There's this ingrained notion that taking time for ourselves is selfish and that's a negative thing. The English language really fails us because we associate being selfish as a negative idea. For many, the idea of turning your phone off for a few hours or an evening is seen as being selfish and that's negative. But is that so bad? Are you harming anyone by taking steps to recharge a bit so that you can be fully present and give the energy necessary to those you are caring for? I think it is easy to self-sacrifice to the point of martyrdom and that usually doesn't end well. So being able to say, "In order for me to be the best care provider, I need to focus on self-care so that I can bring the best version of myself" is a mindset shift that is really challenging for many to live by.

Comment: I'm a social worker and I work in geriatric care and I agree that the term "selfish" has a negative connotation to it. For myself to feel less guilty about taking time for myself to recharge, I had to replace the term "selfish" with "self-care". It is still very challenging mindset, as you mentioned, but changing the language has helped me feel less guilty.

Question 5: I've struggled with allowing myself to practice self-care pre-COVID and during COVID. Often times we have poor self-awareness of when we show signs of needing to practice self-care. Maybe we need a peer support or a buddy who is there to let us know "you need to take care of yourself"? Is that a system that could work?



Answer: Having a peer support system can work and I recommend it because when we often have a hard time recognizing signs of burn out in ourselves. So it may be helpful if we have somebody else on the other end so that if I were to take on extra shifts, someone is there to alert me that it may be best for me to take a break, because I may not recognize the need to take a break, or feel guilty about suggesting a break for myself. So if a peer or colleague is to suggest it, it may assist in feeling less guilty taking time for self-care because the advice came from someone else.

Also, let's be honest, there are systemic issues that are setting us up for burnout. The systems create burnout and as much as we want to be angry and cynical about it and leave the system, we need to also recognize that changes to the system occur through the people that are in them. So if I need to have the energy to make some systemic changes to help move forward, then I need to take care of myself. There's no way I can do my job and try to make systemic changes if I'm not also taking care of myself. So it's important to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. I don't know if this is the time during COVID to enact these systemic changes as there are additional demands required during a pandemic, but in my opinion the system is setting us up for burnout. Not everyone may agree with that notion, but there many that are overworked and there is more work than can be possibly done no matter how many hours we put in or how much we sacrifice our self-care.

Question 6: So by background I'm a clinician and I've transitioned to a role that now allows me to work from home since COVID started. Some of colleagues are frontline workers and aren't as fortunate to be able to work from home. I sometimes feel guilty because I'm not with them on the frontlines, but working from home has its challenges too. Since working from home, I feel that I need to make myself available at any moment. So if I were to get an email from my director, I will have to respond in minutes. Even during meetings, I find myself multi-tasking and answering emails or doing other work during other meetings. It's come to a point that I had to shut down everything in order to decompress. I think it's this expectation that we all need to wear these "busy badges" and be busy all the time that I feel guilty if I take even the smallest luxury of turning my email off for an hour. Is there anyone that is in the similar situation of feeling the need to be constantly available since transitioning to working from home? How have you managed this stress?

Answer: As someone who is a bonafide survivor of burn out I can say this: I took 2.5 years off work because I burnt myself out so badly. As mentioned already, I think it's important to recognize in each other and in ourselves when we are burning out. Nobody patted me on the back when I burnt myself out. No one said, "Good for you, you worked so hard until you got sick", and no one was really around when I was recovering from the chronic fatigue and it honestly took me two years before I returned to the work force. I think the mindset should shift that instead of creating this expectation of having to be busy all the time, is to encourage more in each other the notion of being able to switch off and recharge, even if it's that one hour of turning your emails or phones off.

For example, I started to put my Zoom meetings on my headset and go for a walk because it allowed me to listen better and at the same time take care of myself. I sometimes feel guilty I do this, but going for a



walk while I listen to a meeting isn't preventing me from doing my job. At the same time I think when we feel like we have to multi-task and are triple tasking at any given moment, that this is a sign of burn out. I've been advocating in our group at work to no longer have evening meetings, as it's not a good time to meet and eats into our "recharge" time.

I would like to add that having self-compassion is important, but also having compassion for our colleagues is huge too. I think what has been problematic is that we use burnout as a noun meaning someone is a 'burnout' as though it's their own fault and they didn't take good care of themselves, or they couldn't handle the work so therefore they are burnouts. I think it's a toxic way to look at things meanwhile we are all experiencing a form of burnout in differing degrees and at different times. So when someone is able to identify the need for self-care and to shut off your phones or email, it still takes a level of courage to lead by that example because you may be labeled as someone who can't handle things, meanwhile everyone else who isn't practicing self-care are spreading themselves out pretty thin. So I think that burnout needs to become a verb and that it's something that happens.

Question 7: I've spoken to colleagues of mine that are in the middle of their training or completing their training and a common thread in those conversations is that they have this fear of failure of providing the best quality care to their patients, or fear that their training hasn't prepared them to now be experts in their respective fields. I believe this ties into the notion of Imposter Syndrome – what are some ways to combat the anxieties that are driven by this?

Answer: Imposter Syndrome by definition is the feeling of being a fraud even though you are capable and I think there are two things that are at play. First is that notion of "I actually do have the capacity to do this and maybe in stepping outside my comfort zone and challenging myself may help me". So viewing a challenging situation as a learning opportunity and a growing experience. Secondly, we all at one point or another have been challenging so being gentle with ourselves in terms of the expectations we place ourselves. For example, if you had only 1-year experience in a field and you held yourself to the same expectations as someone with 10 years of experience, then maybe it's time to recognize that you need to change your internal expectations and not be so hard on yourself. The voices that tell us we are not good enough are usually our internal voices, and not the voices of other people. I think many of us in this field tend to have perfectionist tendencies, and the stress of wanting to be perfect all the time can lead to negative thought patterns of "what if". So for example, if we have someone who's an overachiever in high school, they may get into that "what if" spiral of "What if I fail my math test, then I won't graduate high school. What if I don't graduate high school then I won't get into university. What if I don't get a job because I didn't get in to university", and so on. So the notion of Imposter Syndrome is also the fear of being exposed as a fraud and realizing you aren't up to the task. What may be helpful is move away from the "What if" spiral of thinking to a "Even if" thought pattern. So "Even if my director didn't like the work I produced, then I can work harder and find ways to improve". This change from "What if" to "Even if" thought pattern can be an effective tool towards being more resilient as it shows that you can handle whatever challenges comes your way.



Question 8: I've heard many say they feel guilty when they decide to take time for self-care, but in fact in my own experience it's my colleagues' comments that make me feel guilty. I was chatting with my co-worker and I mentioned to her that every morning before work, I go out for a walk as it helps with my mental health, and her response was, "How do you find the time?" and I told her that I prioritize my mental health as I can't help anyone else if I don't take care of myself, and I felt that I was being judged, as though I'm not as busy because I am able to make the time for myself. Any tips on how to manage this when what others say makes you feel guilty for self care?

Answers: I'm reminded of old wisdom from Rabbi Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?" and I think we always forget about the first part. I think it's wonderful that you are putting yourself first and the fact that this quote was from 2000 years ago shows this is not a new issue for us to struggle with.

We are very fortunate within our team that during our weekly meetings we do one to five minutes dedicated to doing a mindfulness activity together. It's been helpful to decompress and since we are all doing it together, there is no added guilt of taking time for yourself. It can also be helpful for those working in LTC facilities, to take one minute of mindfulness before entering a resident's room. Personally, when I feel like I'm going to explode and I'm in the middle of a meeting, I will turn my video off to decompress. We don't always need 20 or 30 minutes to decompress, so even taking a few minutes may help with feeling less guilty.

If I can just comment on "guilty" for a minute because it's a word that came up often and I think a lot of us have hair triggers for guilt that are often misfired. So guilt is a feeling we have that helps signal when we are doing something wrong. It can be a healthy emotion to signal to us that we've done something wrong. However often times it takes very little to set off that feeling of guilt so I would encourage all of you that the next time you feel guilty to step back and ask yourself "did I do something wrong?". If you have trouble asking yourself this then I encourage you to frame it as "if someone else did what you did, is that something that's wrong?". So if someone else decided to take a walk to get some fresh air after a 10-hour shift, would that be wrong? No, so is guilt the appropriate emotion to have? And so it's helpful to reflect on when we feel guilty, are we truly doing something wrong as the feeling of guilt may over fire or misfire especially when we're tired and felt we haven't done enough.

To comment on your friend making you feel guilty about taking time for yourself, I think we become used to this weird competitiveness around who is self-sacrificing more and who is more tired. I don't want to win that game, so you can be the one that's more tired or too busy for self-care. I've decided to not engage in that competition. I'll be competitive about chess or basketball, but in terms of the game of who is suffering more, you can have it.

Question 9: Any final thoughts about today's session on burnout and resiliency?



Answer: I think it's important to recognize we are all in this together and we will get through it together. I do a lot of teaching with healthcare aides and I find it helpful to validate them when they express feeling helpless and that they don't have all the answers. It helps to bridge the conversation by acknowledging how they are feeling. We are figuring it out together, and we are all deserving of having the supports needed to get through this.