

TAKING CARE OF US

The health of professional oncology caregivers

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We live and work in stressful times. Increasing cancer incidence, complicated and expensive cancer treatments, limited healthcare budgets and shortages of specialists put pressure on each of us to work harder.

On top of this, expanding responsibilities in administration, research and teaching yields a recipe for burnout. The statistics are alarming. In 2000, 53% of medical oncologists in Ontario reported being emotionally exhausted, as did 37% of other allied health staff.¹ Literature shows that about half of all oncologists are in fairly advanced stages of burnout.^{2,3}

WHY IS OUR HEALTH CRITICAL?

Taking care of ourselves is intrinsically related to caring for our patients. When we are well-rested and happy we can better listen to the people we serve and act from a personal store of empathy and compassion. Becoming more sensitized to our own emotional and psychospiritual issues attunes us to patients' needs and allows us to serve them and their families better — and potentially saves healthcare dollars.⁴ Modelling a healthy lifestyle ourselves is a great way to help patients limit risk factors such as smoking, obesity, lack of exercise and high fat intake.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM

The critical step in preventing burnout in ourselves and others is to recognize the risk factors and warning signs. Maslach defines burnout as the prolonged response to chronic stressors on the job, as manifested in 3 domains:^{5,6}

- physical and emotional exhaustion
- depersonalization and cynicism
- inefficacy

When we start to see our patients as diagnoses and detach ourselves, it means we are getting burnt out — and can easily lose our sense of personal accomplishment. No oncology worker is immune from some burnout, variable over time. Mount and Vincent nicely describe this spectrum as “moving from caring to apathy, involvement to distancing... from openness to self-protection, from trust to suspicion, from enthusiasm to disillusionment and even on to cynicism,

Healing ourselves

Caring for patients with cancer puts oncology professionals at high risk for experiencing emotional exhaustion due to long-term work-related stress, or “burnout.” Here, a radiation oncologist and psychologist present a compelling case for acknowledging the negative effects of such emotional exhaustion on patient care — and the positive benefits of recognizing the danger signs and taking steps to avoid and counteract stress and burnout. They maintain that individual professionals, as well as organizations, must take responsibility for emotional health, and offer a number of practical suggestions for doing so.

Before reading further, please take the Adult APGAR test shown in Figure 1, opposite.

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and from self-esteem to personal devaluation.”⁷

Sources of risk and obstacles to healing

Staff shortages create unhealthy workloads and we are often too busy for self-care. Moreover, about half our patients die of cancer. We are exposed to vicarious emotional trauma every day at work. Compounding the risk, personality traits which make us effective oncology workers also put us at risk of self-neglect — early warning signs of burnout may not register for people who focus strongly on helping others:

- we are typically overconscientious perfectionists, with a strong sense of responsibility and guilt, who delay our own gratification to serve others
- most of us tend towards being concerned with trying to please others, and are plagued with self-doubts and relatively uncomfortable receiving love and approval

We perpetuate the stigmas of mental distress or illness by not acknowledging that they are part of normal human experience. Our medical culture sends us the message that we need to deal with this problem ourselves, that something is wrong with us if we’re burning out. Yet we are ill-equipped to deal with our own emotional pain: physicians especially — denying their own needs — are unlikely to have a family physician, often continue to work when they are sick, are noncompliant when help is provided, and are more likely to self-medicate.

Compounding the problem, the culture we work in makes it difficult to help our colleagues. Issues of confidentiality and reluctance to “pry” hold us back from asking important questions. Most of us didn’t learn how to develop positive work relationships in our training and often lack the language to be supportive. Mentors are rare and usually are found by happenstance. Time pressures both directly affect our bodily stress responses and indirectly affect our access to social resources to limit stress. Stress can lead to blaming, getting angry at others or withdrawing from them. Lack of time means these interpersonal strains are often not dealt with.

FIGURE 1. Adult APGAR test

1. I am satisfied with the ACCESS I have to my emotions — to laugh, to be sad, to feel pleasure or even anger.	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
2. I am satisfied that my life’s PRIORITIES are mine and clearly reflect my values.	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
3. I am satisfied with my commitment to personal GROWTH, to initiate and embrace change.	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
4. I am satisfied with the way I ask for ASSISTANCE from others, professionally and personally, when in trouble.	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
5. I am satisfied with the RESPONSIBILITY I take for my well-being — physically, emotionally and spiritually.	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2

0 = hardly ever 1 = sometimes 2 = almost always

Score yourself:

- 9 or 10 = high level of wellness.
- 6 to 8 = imbalances and stresses that need attention.
- 5 or less = significant difficulties, requiring crucial changes to achieve wellness. Professional counselling, a therapeutic support group or individual work is strongly recommended.

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Organizational factors matter

Key researchers on stress and burnout at work make a strong case that organizations can and should change in order to reduce risk factors.^{4,6,8}

Organizational culture is multifaceted, with work pressure, autonomy, supervisory and peer relationships all playing roles in burnout. Being part of a good team leads to experiencing less stress.⁹ Change at the organizational level, however, is difficult. As oncology workers, we need to form a united, transprofessional front to urge that protecting us from “psychohazards” is as important as protecting us from biohazards. Expert advice such as Leiter and Maslach’s program to help organizations prevent burnout may be useful.¹⁰ Mediators can be hired to help us work through interpersonal conflict at work and help organizations build an atmosphere of trust, essential for our health and team well-being.¹¹

WHAT CAN WE DO RIGHT NOW?

Just say no

The idea of adding another activity (e.g. a brisk walk at noon) is stressful because our schedules are crammed already. The solution is to drop the non-essential activities in our lives. Paradoxically, as we cut back on scheduled activities and begin to care for ourselves, we have more energy, better concentra-

tion and greater productivity. Saying no is critical to establishing balance and setting priorities. Remember, as the Talmud says, “The sun will set without thine assistance.”

Take time to reflect

Setting aside time a few times every week to reflect on our experience has many benefits. Reflection can mean looking inward at our thoughts and feelings, looking at our role in a given situation or looking at life in general. Regardless of how we do it, reflection is a prerequisite for guiding ourselves towards a healthier and happier life situation. Daily mindfulness is a way of staying in touch with the emotional experience of serving our patients and interacting with colleagues. Mindfulness allows us to see more clearly how we affect those around us. Ongoing introspection also provides us with feedback on whether the effort to promote self-health is actually working.

Finding a quiet place to be for 5 minutes can have a profound effect on our physiology. Stopping the mad rush, simply laying aside all judgements and becoming aware of our own thoughts and experiences usually provokes the relaxation response. Practices like relaxation exercises, yoga or Qigong achieve this effect. Afterwards, we

TABLE 1. Example of reframing

Situation	Feelings	Thoughts	Counterthoughts
I make a medical error.	I feel angry at myself and doubtful about my skills.	I'm not good enough.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm human, I can't expect to be perfect. • I will learn from this experience — it's unlikely to happen again. • It's best to get over this so I can serve the next patient better.

return to work with a clearer mind and a calmer presence.

Reflection can be a time to review your life. Ask yourself what is most important to you. What's working in your life and what's not? What would you like to do more of? Try writing in a journal for just 5 minutes a day, or consider the bigger questions during a brisk walk. Reflection is also necessary for choosing how we want to change our health.

Boost resilience

Luckily we all possess resilience — the ability to “bounce back” from stress and move towards wholeness. Some of the best ways to build more resilience

follow here. Choose the tips that work for you on your personal journey towards living the life you want:

Move towards goals

Making even small steps towards goals can help. Sometimes we need to change bad habits (e.g. getting angry) or add good ones (e.g. relaxing). An effective way to do this is:¹²

- choose a goal and commit to it
- do some preparation to understand what conditions YOU can control to avoid triggering behaviour you want to change
- check on how often you actually do (or don't do) the behaviour you want to change

- start slowly and gradually make the changes you want, rewarding yourself each time you take a step towards your goal

Keep things in perspective

Consider the old saying: “Give me the strength to change what can be changed, the serenity to accept what can't and the wisdom to know the difference.” Imagine looking at your clinic list in the morning and realizing that once again you're booked beyond capacity — despite all of your efforts to avoid this. The natural response is to become angry, upset or emotionally withdrawn. Another option is to “reframe” — to change how we perceive the problem. Start by taking a few slow deep breaths, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system. Then, begin to calm yourself with reframing statements such as “I'll just see one patient at a time and I'll get through this fine,” or “let's see what I can learn from my patients today.”

Most of us don't realize how often we focus on negatives, expect the worst, use black-and-white thinking or have negative thoughts about ourselves. Such unnoticed thoughts lead to the negative emotions we do notice. The health benefits of positive emotions and the health costs of negative ones are well-established.^{13,14} You can learn to recognize and counter negative thoughts. Think of chemistry: you need to find the right base to neutralize an acid. Do your own experiments — try out different thoughts until you find ones that really work for you (see Table 1). Then, practice, practice, practice. As we make positive changes, remarkably, we become more efficient, better providers to our patients and more supportive coworkers for our colleagues.

TABLE 2. Top tips for connecting with coworkers

Always treat others with respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sincerely acknowledge others' work. Example: (to secretary) “Carol, you were great at helping me with the last-minute preparations”
Show that you value input from others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: (to psychologist) “Your observation that the family won't visit my patient because they can't face her death helps to explain some things. Do you have suggestions about how to get them involved?”
Communicate clearly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give as much information as is needed. • Avoid jargon • Summarize your own and others' main points as a check on understanding
Resolve conflict quickly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sense out of interactions: what is your coworker trying to accomplish? • Try to meet the coworker's needs if at all possible • Try to mend fences... agree to disagree, indicate that you value the person
Be open to learning from others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions about what workers from other professions can offer • Don't be afraid to ask for an explanation of professional jargon

Observe healthy daily habits

Exercise — exercising is the single most effective way to quickly improve health. Substantial research shows that it acts as a mild antidepressant, helps sleep, improves quality of life and protects against multiple diseases.¹⁵


Exercising with someone helps motivation and acts as a great social support. The suggested minimum aerobic exercise is 3 times a week for 30 minutes; going beyond 6 50-minute workouts per week gives little extra health benefit. Taking the stairs at work is an easy, cheap adjunct to other exercise.

Sleep — we all know that lack of sleep can affect thinking, emotional control, work and quality of life.¹⁵ Less well known is that it can affect metabolic and hormonal processes. Getting a minimum of 7 hours of good sleep at night may even promote longer life.¹⁶

Eating — many of us are “too busy” to consistently eat healthy meals. If your idea of lunch is a chocolate bar and coffee, try bringing a collection of healthier snacks — food you like — to work.

Connecting — how we interact is critical to how the team works on behalf of the patient but also has well-known health costs or benefits to ourselves.¹³ Protection from burnout and intent to remain in medicine are better predicted by positive relationships with others at work than by other job pressures.¹⁷ Support from colleagues is specifically helpful in limiting the effects of emotional demands at work.¹⁸ On the other hand, conflict with coworkers is associated with depression, decreased self-esteem and physical symptoms,¹⁹ and with psychiatric problems in general.²⁰ It’s worth working on relationships — **Table 2** offers suggestions.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The foundation to providing excellent patient care and working effectively on any oncology team is, paradoxically, to take care of yourself. This basic truth will become increasingly obvious in the medical community. But how many terrific people will we lose to burnout and stress-related illness before we — as individuals, team members and organizations make the necessary changes? 

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