

Resisting Burnout: A Mindset for Health Caregivers

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Many enter the medical professions inspired by a passion to serve people in need. There is a heartfelt desire to effect healing and wholeness in people's lives. It is more than a career. It is a calling.

And yet caregivers can fall victim to compassion fatigue. Burnout is precipitated by responding to overwhelming needs, lack of recognition, little appreciation, seemingly small success, intangible results, and no control over outcomes.

Early studies of the burnout syndrome identified two main causes:

- Giving of self until there is nothing more to give and the emotional well runs dry.
- Finding the chosen profession is not as satisfying as one had hoped.

One way of resolving compassion fatigue for some, is to assume leadership responsibility as director, supervisor, or administrator. This brings relief from the stress of working with people in need. Yet the task of administering programs and supervising personnel has its own stressors. They find it is not satisfying either, because this is not why they entered the helping profession in the first place. It is an escape, not a solution.

The remedy for not letting the well run dry is to practice self-care. There are many ways to care for heart, mind, body, and spirit and I encourage you to seek those out.

I am offering suggestions for resisting burnout centered on mindset – how to retain the spirit of your calling by seeing beyond your present situation and circumstances. Be mindful of the greater good, the person, and the spirit.

Be mindful of the greater good

In the activity and intensity of work it is easy to lose sight of the larger benefit. You see the immediate benefits of recovery. Yet there is more to it than physical healing. Patients are touched in heart, mind, and spirit by the manner in which you care for them. This is an unseen benefit that extends to families, friends, coworkers, and communities.

Be mindful of the greater good your care is providing. It can help you rise above the weariness, frustration, or irritation of the present moment.

Be mindful of the person

Those you care for share a common humanity, experiencing the joys and challenges of life just as you do. Patients at the extreme end of their coping skills may act out inappropriately,

venting their frustrations on the caregiver, or resisting the help that is being offered. Beyond the anxiety of physical pain and discomfort, they may be carrying hidden concerns. Are the children being cared for, who will do my work, can I pay the bills, what will happen if I die?

It is hard not to take these experiences personally or to react defensively. It helps to *be mindful of the person* and not the behavior.

Be mindful of the spirit

When I was a parish minister, I became frustrated by a woman who kept returning seeking help with finances, food, rent, or gas. I wanted to break the cycle by setting limits on further help. Or did I want to cut her off because of my own need not to be bothered again? As I was heating a frozen dinner for her in the church kitchen, she said with anguish and despair, *My soul hurts. My soul hurts. Do you know what I mean?* I knew what she meant. I had been there in my life too. Suddenly she was no longer a sponger abusing the system. She was a sister worn out by the struggle of life – a lost soul in despair. She needed care at a deeper level.

It helps to remember that you are caring for the spirit, not just symptoms or needs. When you can, be in the moment with that person. Give them more than surface attention. Listen deeply. Soul care is important in the healing process. *Be mindful of the spirit.*

Unlike many professions, caregivers in the healing arts don't see the long term results of their efforts. Patients leave with wounds that are still healing, medications, and instructions for self-care. You send them on their way and just as quickly have to turn to the next person in need. Sometimes you wonder how they are doing. You don't always have the satisfaction of seeing the end result.

To resist burnout, try to have a mindset that accepts you can only do your best and trust that healing continues because of the care you have given.

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