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Coaching Healthcare Leaders

Navigating the chaos to bring
out the best in its people

Coaching the
Care Givers

How Providers
Become Leaders

Physician,
Heal Thyself



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Coaching the Care Givers

Understanding the drivers of burnout in healthcare



By Cynthia Ackrill, MD, ACC &
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“As much as I wanted to be a doctor, I also wanted a family. I had no idea how the two desires worked against each other. Early in my internship I discovered I had endometriosis and suddenly my assumption that I could have it all was challenged! I wound up in the infertility quagmire, my confidence and identity at risk. My doctors told me I really needed to reduce my stress, but no one could tell me how. This just added guilt to my overwhelm and fear. Why couldn’t I find this magical switch for chilling out while working 36 hour days, tackling insane to-do lists, worrying about my patients, fretting about my advancement in the program, wondering if I would ever have a normal family life, and trying to prove I could be a good doctor? I studied how stress related to disease and the healing process, but I had a hard time managing my own.”

~ Cynthia Ackrill, MD, PCC-candidate

If you are going to coach healthcare providers, you need to know the triggers of stress that are both common and unique to professionals working in this field. Some of these are based on myths and assumptions. Some are ego-based, tied to the person’s identity. Some relate to the fear of failure or of being discovered as imperfect. As a coach, listen for these trigger points. By reflecting back what you hear, and asking how these factors keep your clients in “protective” mode, you might be able to help them find new ways to see themselves and their world.

What Leads to Stress & Burnout?

After leaving her medical practice, Cynthia devoted her time to defining the major factors causing stress in healthcare professionals. Here is what she has discovered:

1. There is a culture of perfection. Mistakes are potentially fatal and the culture promotes “already knowing” where vulnerability is taboo. Competitive education promotes confidence over humility. In addition, the paternalistic doctor-patient model that still exists promotes a version of the doctor as “all knowing.”

These unwritten expectations trigger feelings of both shame and fear as healthcare professionals worry people will discover that they are imperfect – or, worse, that they are frauds. To complicate this, physicians have historically avoided self-development, so even though many hospital systems are providing internal and external coaches, getting

a commitment to really do deep self-work can be a challenge for the coach.

2. Knowledge is king. IQ has long been dominant over EQ in the healthcare field. Knowing is the metric. As a result, the players have been able to advance through the field and to positions of power with relatively less EQ than in many other industries. Adolescent behavior has been tolerated for years.

3. Self-care is not taught beyond physical self-care. The patient is supposed to be the focus, not the doctor. Martyrdom is rewarded. A phrase the old guard loves to knock around to impress the newer folks is, “The problem with being on call every other night is you miss half of the good cases.” They have no idea what “heal thyself first” really means.

Doctors have an inflated concept of how much they can cram into their schedules and stay smart and healthy. They also hold a belief (or an excuse) that knowing about a disease somehow reduces your vulnerability to it. They are shocked when they have a heart attack or their digestive system breaks down. Even if something scares them into exercising and eating right, they soon lose sight of their goals as they become slaves to their overbooked schedules.

4. Enormous physical, mental, emotional & spiritual stamina is required. Since they have little understanding of the signs and symptoms of early burnout, medical professionals don’t seek help. Cynicism is a very common unrecognized symptom; it shows up as a lack of engagement in everything outside of their work, including resistance in meetings.

Clinicians are often so overwhelmed by important and urgent demands, they unconsciously push back in areas where they can without major consequences, including administrative duties, leadership tasks, and even their coaching sessions. You might find it difficult to get them to put energy into your conversa-

tions or to follow through with goals.

5. Negativity is part of the culture. Healthcare has been a problem-oriented field for hundreds of years. While this mindset supports fighting disease, there is a negative bias that is reinforced. Cynicism has been part of the bonding in the culture for a long time. Add in the overwhelming amount of change, and it is harder to feel positive about the future of medicine or an individual’s career. The resulting lack of hope undermines creativity, positive leadership and coach-ability.

6. Fixed mindsets and risk aversion abound. Stanford psychology professor Carol S. Dweck explores the dilemma of

“IQ has long been dominant over EQ in the healthcare field. Knowing is the metric.”

the culture that promotes perfection in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. People who are constantly reinforced for their intelligence and talent end up with fixed mindsets that result in spending more time protecting what they know than opening up to learning from others they don’t see as experts.

If you don’t have a background in healthcare, these clients might not respect you as a coach. Also, fixed-mindset people only do what they know they will succeed at doing. They are constantly trying to prove their great worth. They are often competitive and might hoard information. It is more important that they are seen as better than others than as equals. They resist change and avoid crucial conversations that could reveal their vulnerabilities. They have difficulties stepping into leadership roles.

7. The realities of the profession lead to declines in human intrinsic reward.

It’s hard to feel like you can master, find autonomy, or keep your purpose at the forefront when you exist in a mindless sleep-work cycle. There is less appreciation in general, even from patients; less respect; less quality time with colleagues and family – the very social connections critical for human resilience.

The role of technology, while it has brought some amazing capabilities to the field, has further separated the clinicians from the human contact that rewards and sustains their spirit. Layers of bureaucracy further use up time and energy, distancing them further from purpose and meaning. Coaching offers a way to help these individuals reconnect to their “why,” to find personal reward and satisfaction in a high-demand life.

Is Healthcare Your Calling?

Is it worth specializing in coaching the healthcare professional? Since telling people how to change is the least effective method to facilitate learning, coaching could be the only way to engage the brains of resistant healthcare professionals or re-open their hearts to the calling of their profession. Even when they face physical, emotional or spiritual crises, they often avoid the truth. But a coach, willing to courageously use reflection and challenging questions, offers a way to safely break through the ego barrier to create much-needed, possibly relationship-saving/life-saving, shifts in perception for these special clients.

The work is no doubt perplexing as well as extremely rewarding. When you coach a healthcare professional, your coaching touches many lives beyond your client. You help the healer “heal thyself first” and you support leadership in an industry critical to each and every one of us. We all need more coaches who find their calling in healthcare.