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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

Physician, Heal Thyself

Coaching healthcare
professionals towards self-care



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Stress, overwhelm and lack of self-care are very common in healthcare professionals. It's an interesting paradox: healthcare professionals place their focus on prioritizing and caring for the wellbeing and health of others at the expense of their own self-care and health.

Recent statistics reveal a glaring and important breakdown in how our healthcare leaders and clinicians are responding to the complexity and challenges in healthcare today. Published reports indicate that 30-65 percent of physicians reported being in a state of burnout.¹ Nurses also report a higher level of stress, burnout and depression than the average population. Healthcare professionals working in hospital settings or on the front line in areas such as pri-

mary care, emergency, or higher-intensity specialties such as critical care and oncology have an even greater risk of experiencing burnout.²

Professional coaching is well established as an approach to supporting professional development and performance of executives and leaders in business. It is less frequently cited as a strategy for supporting healthcare leaders and professionals. Healthcare professionals face significant pressures and stress that affect their wellbeing and ultimately their ability to provide quality care.

Burnout is a very common side effect of prolonged self-neglect and emotional fatigue among healthcare professionals. Widely researched and well documented, burnout is a negative psychological response to workplace stress and includes emotional fatigue, cynicism and decreased self-effi-

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cacy.³ Additional characteristics of burnout have been described as a loss of enthusiasm for career and work and a low sense of personal efficacy and accomplishment¹

Burnout and stress impact communication skills, attention, ability to focus, and contribute to multiple health problems.⁴ Emotional fatigue, cynicism and feeling disillusioned with one's career will ultimately have a ripple effect that extends beyond the individual. Important relationships with loved ones and significant others, along with professional relationships with patients, families, and colleagues, will be also be affected.

Context Matters

People who choose healthcare as a career are often driven by a mission to serve, help and benefit society. Often there is a deep sense of pride and commitment to the story of self-sacrifice which enables them to persevere and provide care in very difficult situations. Eventually, however, ignoring self-care results in a personal health or relationship crisis that calls their attention.

Unpacking this paradox reveals that this behavior of denying or devaluing self-care is embedded deep in the context of healthcare. Healthcare providers are socialized in their educational programs to put the needs of others first and to minimize or put off their own self-care needs. Frequently, sleep, hunger and even going to the bathroom are ignored until after the needs of patients are taken care of.

Compounding this are the real pressures and complexities of healthcare settings. Constant and rapidly shifting processes, shrinking financial support for services and more complex patients are a daily reality.

Striving for Perfection

Frequently in healthcare, aiming for perfection is essential. Lives are truly at stake and excellence may not be "enough" when an error can be life threatening or cause physical harm. And striving for perfection in a highly complex system with multiple competing tensions, players and stakeholders adds to the experience of stress and burnout.

Emotional Fatigue

While compassion for others is an essential component to caring for others, continued exposure to traumatic and emotionally charged situations can lead to emotional depletion. Over time, emotional detachment and depersonalization become coping strategies if alternative supportive strategies are not in place. Healthcare providers who deny their emotions to maintain this emotional detachment may experience fatigue, feelings of failure, irritability and self-doubt.

Maintaining emotional distance supports objectivity and is often encouraged by peers. Ironically, this runs counter to what often draws people into this type of work. Navigating the tension between remaining objective enough to make good decisions without emotionally disconnecting adds to the complexity. Many providers will struggle to find a balance between creating an emotional connection and displaying empathy while remaining objective and focused. Displaying emotional vulnerability can also lead to an experience of shame if it is interpreted as unprofessional.

Burning Questions

Following are some questions to provoke new possibilities:

- What do you care about?
- What would be different in your life if you made time to address these cares?
- How has striving served you? How is it serving you now?
- Where is it possible to let go of striving and move with more ease?
- Describe how burnout feels in your body, where do you experience it?
- What mood are you in? What mood would you like to be in?
- What are you craving in your life?

How Coaching Helps

Personal development coaching is a relevant strategy to address burnout and overwhelm in healthcare professionals. Developmental, holistic coaching aimed at active reflection building self-awareness and focusing on individual strengths and inner wisdom can reinforce self-efficacy and build resiliency to burnout.

Here are four coaching moves to help your coachee shift out of overwhelm and burnout:

1. Explore their Cares

Overwhelm and burnout may be revealed in a mood and energy of cynicism or resignation. Initially, the possibility for something different seems unreachable; coachees may hold a perspective that things are out of their control and won't change. Initiating a conversation that ignites lightness and creativity can create an opening for examining powerful stories and patterns of unhealthy behavior.

Asking questions that explore what your coachees care about is a powerful and generative move as a coach. Giving time to the exploration of care has the power to reengage them with their inner voice rather than the voice of role

performance and expectations. Talking about care is a mood shifter; it opens our heart and emotions to reconnect to our whole self, our values and our vulnerabilities.

Dive into their why for self-care, what is important to them related to health and wellbeing. Guide them to identify and design practices that align with their care and core values related to wellbeing. Coach them to cast a new vision for their life, one that embraces self-care and wellbeing as relevant and important. Listen for and confirm their commitment to take care of themselves.

2. Increase Self-Awareness

Our interpretation of stress and overwhelm is shaped and influenced by the interwoven relationship between language, emotions, moods and body.

Ask questions and share observations to increase your coachees' self-awareness. Listen for and draw attention to their interpretation as one interpretation versus the truth of their situation and the stories they live in.

Co-create practices for your coachees to notice and identify how they experience overwhelm; what emotional fatigue feels like and how it shows up in their body. If denying or delaying attending to emotions and body signals is well practiced, the recognition of their response to overwhelm and burnout may be muted. Pushing through fatigue is a very common experience for healthcare providers; often, grit and endurance are highly valued and even revered while vulnerability may be a sign that someone just can't cut it. Helping your coachee learn to recognize signs or signals of fatigue will be crucial to building practices for addressing self-care.

3. Take Small Steps

Encourage creating practices for self care that are replenishing and easy rather than goals that may produce additional feelings of overwhelm and fatigue. Explore how to use small steps to create lasting change and momentum without adding stress.

You may want to suggest a regular practice for scanning their energy, body tensions and sensations, moods and emotions. Engage coachees in noticing and becoming aware during their day of activities that are revitalizing and those that are depleting.

4. Learning to Manage Capacity

Learning to manage capacity is an opportunity for personal growth. Although some coachees may be struggling with capacity and others may be in breakdown, this doesn't mean they are doomed to a life of overwhelm and burnout.

4 Coaching Moves to Help Shift out of Overwhelm/Burnout

1. Connect your coachees to their cares and guide them to cast a new vision. Listen for commitment to take action towards self-care.
2. Ask questions, share observations and co-design practices that heighten self awareness of how burnout and overwhelm show up for them; shed light on the inter-relationship between language, emotion, mood and body.
3. Encourage a "small steps" approach to creating lasting change.
4. Coach to increase skill in managing their capacity.

Explore moves that are available to practice with and build competency to learn to manage capacity.

While many factors in the workplace are out of their control, they can learn new ways to respond to it. Partner with individual coachees to identify where they can say no to additional requests, to renegotiate deadlines or to delegate certain tasks to others. Raise awareness of where opportunity exists to ask for help, and coach them to access this as another move towards enhancing personal capacity.

Coaching offers a powerful approach to helping healthcare professionals to become more resilient, preventing burnout and overwhelm. Guiding coachees to reconnect with their care, heighten self-awareness and learn how to better manage their capacity will increase their personal resiliency. Coaching offers an excellent strategy to empower healthcare professionals to take care of their own wellbeing and live a vibrant, fulfilling life which ultimately is good for everybody.

Notes:

¹Schneider, S. Kingsolver, K., Rosdahl, J., (2014). "Physician Coaching to Enhance Well-Being: A Qualitative Analysis of a Pilot Intervention." *Explore* 10(6), 372-378.

²Rushton, C.H., Batcheller, J., Schroeder, K., Donohue, P., (2015). "Burnout and Resilience Among Nurses Practicing in High Intensity Settings." *American Journal of Critical Care*, 24(5), 412-419.

³Laschinger, H.K.S., Fida, R. (2014). New nurses burnout and workplace wellbeing: The influence of authentic leadership and psychological capital. *Burnout Research*, 1, 19-28.

⁴Raab, K., Sogge, K., Parker, N., Flament, M.F., (2015). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and self-compassion among mental healthcare professionals: a pilot study. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 18(6), 503-512.

Further References:

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