

Doctor “Burnout”:

Navigating Moral Injury in Medicine

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No financial disclosures

Physician Support Line

Free Confidential Peer Support Line by
Volunteer Psychiatrists Helping our US Physician Colleagues
Navigate the Many Intersections of Our Personal and
Professional Lives

1-888-409-0141

**7 days a week
8am - 1am ET**

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What's in a name?

- Defining (and Redefining):
 - Burn Out
 - Self Care
 - Moral Injury

Burnout

- Definition: constellation of symptoms – “malaise, fatigue, frustration, cynicism, inefficiency” that arise from “making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” in the workplace.
- Definition transferred from other fields, their solutions did not

A Closer Look

Burn out indicates:

- Internal problems of regulating emotion
- Impetus on the individual to come up with solution
- Which then leads to suggestions of...

“Self Care”

- Often described as:
 - Taking breaks, vacations
 - Comfort food
 - Spa day
 - Etc.

- Well meaning, superficially addresses the pain, not the cancer

Moral Injury

- First described in armed services returning from Vietnam
 - Deep emotional residue from the war, but not following PTSD criteria
 - Emotions were not due to imminent anxiety of mortality (PTSD)
 - But due to anxiety about morality (Moral Injury)
 - “Following Orders”
 - “I did things you wouldn’t believe”

Moral Injury in Healthcare

- Occurs when we perpetrate, bear witness, or fail to prevent an act that transgresses our moral beliefs
- Healthcare is not just a job/profession.
- Our “job contract” is the Hippocratic Oath.
 - Put the patient first
- But practically and clinically, it has become much more complicated

The Stakeholders

- The patient
- The EMR
- The insurers
- Pharmaceuticals
- The hospital
- The healthcare system
- Financial security (loans)
- Time, uncertainty, our own mortality

The Scapegoat

- The physician:
 - Inadvertently represents to the patient all of these things coming in the way of their health
 - → internalization

“Moral injury describes the challenge of simultaneously knowing what care patients need but being unable to provide it due to constraints that are beyond our control”

- Wendy Dean, MD et al

Reframing

- Burn out: due to a broken individual. “You are not cut out to be a doctor”
- Moral Injury: due to a broken system. “The job is doing you and the patient a disservice”

Problem Solving

- Managing psychological injuries:
 - Guilt/Shame
 - Anger/resentment
- Managing systemic injuries:

Psychological Injuries

- Role of the individual:
 - Accepting that these are normal reactions to being put in a helpless situation
 - Understanding that having these hard emotions serve a purpose: reminder that we still have a moral compass
 - Understanding discomfort bring about change

Forgiveness of the Self

- “Inner reconciliation where one acknowledges and makes amends for harm done, while also accepting the self as a fallible person engaged in continued moral growth”
- Needs:
 - Time – not linear process
 - Deliberation and volition
 - Reconciliation
 - Acceptance

Systemic Reform

- **Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation**
 - Legislative initiative to federally fund access and support of medical professionals seeking mental health care, including hospital credentialing barriers.
- **Humans Before Heroes Initiative (AMWA collab)**
 - Reframing mental health questions on state medical licensing applications to distinguish illness vs. impairment

Lessons from the Physician Support Line

- Lessons we are learning through callers:
 - What physicians expect of themselves
 - What patients expect of them
 - What family/friends expect of them
 - What society expects of them
 - → internalization of these expectations at the cost of your own wellness
- Hippocratic Oath is about duty towards your patient. But not at your self sacrifice

***You Don't Have to Set Yourself
On Fire to Keep Others Warm***

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Please visit fixmoralinjury.org organized by Dr. Dean and Dr. Talbot for resources including literature and toolkits on this subject

fixmoralinjury.org

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Moral Injury of Healthcare

Let's get back to healthcare that's good for patients *and* for clinicians.

References:

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