

Resilience: the power of bouncing back

What does personal and professional resilience mean to you? How could this be supported to benefit both your professional life and your patients/clients?

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Introduction

"The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." **Nelson Mandela**

Resilience is essentially the ability to bounce back from challenges. Resilience involves having effective coping mechanisms and the capacity to respond to stressors in a healthy way. Personal resilience refers to one's ability to overcome adversity in their personal life and effectively deal with and learn from challenges involving friends, family, health, etc¹. By contrast, professional resilience refers to one's ability to overcome obstacles in the workplace. Professional resilience requires maintaining a balance between professional values and career sustainability². Both personal and professional resilience are crucial to many aspects of life.

Resilience is especially important when working in healthcare since clinicians face significant challenges on a daily basis. Furthermore, increased resilience is directly related to improved patient care³. Until recently, resilience was considered to be an intrinsic characteristic that one was born with. New research suggests that resilience can be learned⁴.

The following essay addresses a few common challenges faced by many healthcare professionals and explores methods in which healthcare workers can become more resilient and, in turn, improve patient care.

Challenges Faced By Healthcare Professionals

Physician 'burnout' is a major issue among physicians. It is described as "feeling as though a fire that once burned inside has dwindled, and perhaps even been entirely extinguished." Signs of burnout include decreased enthusiasm and a low sense of accomplishment. Of the 7,300 physicians surveyed by the Archives of Medicine's national survey, 46% reported at least one sign of burnout compared to an overall burnout rate of 28% among other workers⁵.

Feeling overwhelmed with too many challenges and obstacles can cause physician burnout. These obstacles are commonly caused by frustrating patient interactions, time pressure and/or traumatic events. Furthermore, many of these challenges occur for reasons that are completely out of the control of healthcare workers⁵. High rates of burnout emphasize the importance of resilience and the need for healthcare workers to be able to bounce back from setbacks and learn from challenges.

Clinicians may often find themselves in difficult situations with their patients. Common challenging patient factors include personality disorders, vague and undefined symptoms, non-adherence to medical advice and self-destructive behaviors. Managing patients in these situations can be very frustrating for clinicians and cause them to

become unmotivated and less compassionate in their job. This is an issue because it is important for clinicians to remain empathetic and treat every patient equally⁶.

Healthcare workers also often complain of being constantly under time pressure. Due to financial pressure and enhanced billing regulations, physicians are under a lot of pressure to increase the number of patients they see and spend more time doing paperwork. A recent study conducted in the United States, observed 400 primary care physicians over ten years by video. It found that on average each visit length was 15.7 minutes long and the average physician only spent 1.1 minutes on each topic brought up by a patient. Time pressure is a major cause for both physician and patient dissatisfaction⁷.

Lastly, dealing with traumatic events can be very challenging for healthcare workers. Healthcare workers, along with firefighters and police officers, are at an increased risk of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When severely injured patients are presented to the hospital, physicians are usually able to fall into their role and treat their patients effectively. This can temporarily distract them from the severity of the situation. In the aftermath of these situations, however, they may experience feelings such as inadequacy, shame, humiliation, grief and sorrow^(8,9).

It is important that healthcare workers are aware that these challenges are common and that resilience, whether intrinsic or learned, can help them overcome these obstacles and avoid burnout.

Being Resilient: Effective coping mechanisms for healthcare professionals

i. Mindfulness

One effective coping mechanism that can help healthcare workers deal with stress is mindfulness. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leader of mindfulness in medicine, describes mindfulness as the “the practice of open-hearted awareness, focused in the present moment”¹⁰. Dr. Zinn is a professor of medicine as well as a Buddhist who works alongside the Dalai Lama. He has worked to develop a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program which has been proven to help people cope with stress, pain and illness through “moment to moment awareness”.

A small study conducted on 70 primary care physicians found that improvements in mindfulness were correlated with improvements in physician empathy and personal accomplishments as well as decreased burnout, mood disturbances and exhaustion. The physicians were enrolled in an intensive eight week class focusing on mindful meditation, narrative medicine and appreciative inquiry¹¹.

The Balint Society is an international medical organization of clinicians with a mission to improve personal understanding and compassion in the doctor-patient relationship.

Clinicians meet up regularly in Balint Groups to discuss and share difficult clinical situations. Balint Groups provide a setting for clinicians to be mindful of their emotions and provide an outlet for them to share their stresses and worries with their community. The goal of these meetings is to discuss physician obstacles in a group setting and to foster more nurturing and therapeutic relationships between physicians and their patients¹².

Balint Groups and mindfulness-based stress reduction programs are two examples of ways physicians can become more mindful and aware of the challenges they face on a daily basis. They also teach effective coping strategies for stress in a community setting.

ii. Spirituality

Spirituality is another way for clinicians to become more resilient. The term spirituality is often misinterpreted and confused with religion. Spirituality has both philosophical and emotional aspects. Philosophically, spirituality refers to the search for meaning, purpose and truth. Emotionally, spirituality refers to the search for hope, love and inner peace. Many people find spirituality through a connection to religion, art, nature, or through a set of values¹³.

Following the events of the Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013, National Public Radio (NPR) interviewed the hospital chaplain at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a hospital where many of the victims were treated. This interview was notable because the chaplain spoke about her role in supporting both the victims and the hospital staff members. Currently, the role of a hospital chaplain is primarily in aiding terminally ill patients and families with their spiritual concerns. Perhaps the role of the hospital chaplain could be expanded to also support the staff who have witnessed traumatic events, or who simply want support. Clive Kelly, a rheumatologist at Gateshead Hospital in the northeast of England and leader of the Medical Bureau in Lourdes for the Roman Catholic Church, agrees and claims that hospital chaplains in the UK are largely underutilized.

Brown University Medical School conducted a literature review on the link between spirituality and positive health outcomes. They found that 75% of studies showed a positive association between spirituality and health outcomes, particularly with regards to preventing illnesses, coping with illness and recovery from illness through the relaxation response¹⁴.

Given the role of spirituality in improving compassion, relaxation and a feeling of self worth among both medical professionals and patients, it may be worthwhile to expand the role of hospital chaplains to work increasingly with healthcare staff to help overcome challenges and suggest coping mechanisms.

iii. The Grit Factor

“Much of success in life is simply showing up when others fail to do so.” – Woody Allen

The Duckworth Lab at the University of Pennsylvania studies two traits that they believe predict success: grit and self-control. Grit is the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals (like the study of medicine). Gritty individuals have an extremely high interest in attaining their goals and a high likelihood of achieving them. They found that resilience and continuous practice are the two key components of grit⁴.

While grittiness is often thought of as a personality trait, new research suggests that this trait can be learned and cultivated. The Duckworth Lab collaborated with researchers, Yeager, Walton, Hulleman and Dweck and found that developing a growth mindset, social belonging and purpose lead to increased grit. From these results, one can infer that if resilience is a key component of grit, and grit can be learned, so can resilience⁴.

Conclusion

In summary, healthcare professionals need to be able to bounce back from challenges on a daily basis. These challenges may be caused by difficult patient interactions, time pressure or traumatic events. The inability to bounce back from these challenges and learn from them can lead to physician burnout and harm the quality of patient care. Therefore, resilience in healthcare professionals is crucial. Healthcare professionals should work to improve their resilience and develop their grit factor by practicing techniques such as mindfulness and spirituality.

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