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A Mind Matters Column™

Staying Compassionate and Being a Healing Presence

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A question recently posed to me was **“What are some strategies for staying compassionate, without burning out, when a significant number of the patients you care for experience bad outcomes or death?”**

Most physicians enter the medical profession to make a difference to others. They are incredibly smart, work hard, sacrifice immensely, have noble intentions, with kind and compassionate hearts. Society has traditionally respected physicians and rewarded them with reverence, considering them as pillars of their communities.

Physicians today are facing monumental challenges unlike any in the history of medicine! Our sacred profession has not yet found a complete and resilient way of responding to these challenges, and we are paying a very heavy price.

Challenges we are facing today include: a weakening of the sacred doctor-patient relationship due to less time with patients; greater demands to produce, perform and justify; loss of autonomy; increasing non-essential, non-clinical paperwork, emails and reviews; repetitive exposure to trauma, illness, suffering, inadequate options and death; sense of isolation and decrease in connectivity and collegiality; fear of malpractice suits; decline in work-life balance and quality of life; and less time for self-care. Eventually many physicians start to lose the meaning and purpose for their existence as a physician.

More than half of U.S. physicians report symptoms of burnout which is defined as a state of physical and mental exhaustion combined with doubts about their value, their competence and their work. Physicians eventually start losing enthusiasm and compassion, and start treating people as objects. The present-day health care environment in which they are forced to operate causes their work to become transactional rather than relational. They have a low sense of personal accomplishment and a loss of meaning and purpose. Increased irritability, low tolerance for frustration, anger, impatience and cynicism often follow.

Consequences:

Quality of care for the patient is reduced due to low empathy and low compassion; decreased professionalism, and poor decision making resulting in higher medical errors. Quality of patient outcomes is reduced due to lower patient satisfaction of care; a decrease in trust and confidence in their physician; and lower adherence to treatment recommendations.

Personal consequences for the physician are enormous and can include: relationship discord and higher rates of divorce; a five-fold increase in the abuse of prescription drugs and alcohol; increased rates of depression and suicide (several hundred physicians die by suicide every year and several thousand more attempt suicide annually); a decrease in immune system functioning that results in increased vulnerability to illness; and a decrease in career longevity as many are more likely to want to leave the profession early. We should build more resilience in being able to bounce back from the stress and trauma we experience in our daily life and develop increased coping skills for handling challenges with enthusiasm, compassion and connectivity. We need to rediscover our meaning and purpose, and to develop an attitude of gratitude resulting in reclaiming our true joy in medicine.

The key is learning to continuously reinvent yourself. It means learning to understand, cope with, adapt to and influence change; staying physically, emotionally and spiritually active; cultivating new strengths and skills; developing new ways to find joy, purpose and harmony in what we do; and improving our feelings of connection with those we serve, work with, our loved ones and our communities. When we can learn ways to remain relational despite the present-day health care environment that has become transactional, we improve the quality of care and of life for our patients and ourselves.

Based on my decades of experience and insights from science, I would like you to consider acquiring and mastering the following essential mind, brain, and health skills.

Ten Key Practical Skills for Physicians to Cultivate

1. Activate Your Healing System

The presence of stress in a physician's life is so vast that you need to activate your available inner healing system to neutralize the rapid stress reactions happening in your body. This will neutralize the negative physical and emotional effects of the stress on your life.

Healing comes from the ancient word "*Haelan*" which means to be whole or become whole. Healing is also harmony of the mind, body and spirit. Harmony is connection, unity, order and peace. Healing is the opposite of alienation, fragmentation and isolation that is so common in a stressful world. When true healing occurs, relationships are re-established both to oneself and to others. By discovering and developing the skill of healing, you can open the doors of inner perception. Healing can take place by breaking away from everyday thought; calming the inner chatter within; finding inner peace; discovering oneness with a higher power; and decreasing sensory input. There are many ways to discover our healing states including relaxation response, deep breathing techniques, guided imagery, meditation, prayer, yoga, biofeedback, nature, music, art, dance, humor, connectedness, and creativity. Healing is the ultimate creative and regenerative energy with which we are blessed. It is a sign of life's desire to renew, refresh and re-emerge. It enables you to have a healing presence with your patients which is "being in the present with genuine intent and compassion and with belief in others' potential for wholeness".

Healing presence is a gift anyone can develop. It requires time and empathy and is creative in its form and limitless in its rewards. It leads to genuine compassion coming from the heart. It enables you to discover the vibrance, wonder and vitality around you.

2. Cultivating Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a mind-brain skill with which we are all born. Unfortunately, most of us move from it as we go through life. We can rediscover mindfulness by developing and honing the skill. Mindfulness is also known as "*heartfulness*". It basically means being aware of the present moment in its purest form, non-judgmentally, and being in harmony with that moment. It also means being one with the present. This can be practiced and cultivated literally with any activity in life. After you develop the basics of the skill, it can be applied throughout your practice as you connect with patients and families and other members of the healing community, and when you have a task of any nature. Continuous and sustained practice of mindful presence cultivates your awareness to a deeper degree. Science is telling us that this contributes to rich rewards emotionally, brings inner peace and happiness, and physiologically, by toning down the stress reaction system. Physically, many aspects of brain function are affected by mindfulness. These include the activation of the pre-frontal areas, which are centers of judgment, wisdom, insight, decision-making, learning and memory, in conjunction with other areas of the brain. It also right sizes the response of the amygdala so that stress does not activate the stress system or inner hypothalamic pituitary adrenocortical system in an excessive way but activates only in an appropriate and right-size manner.

Mindfulness also enhances your memory and your ability to control emotions and impulses. In my opinion, mindfulness is an essential skill that every physician should develop and master. You will be happy you did. It makes daily life a joy. You start experiencing life's moments in their purest form. Scientists have found your resilience improves by practicing mindfulness.

3. Cognitive Reappraisal

There are many situations, events and interactions in our lives over which we do not have direct control. When they generate stressful reactions or dysfunctional feelings of an excessive nature such as anger, frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, etc., a useful skill to develop is the ability to reappraise your cognitions. Cognitions are thoughts, ideas, and images. Reappraisal means reassessing the value of these thoughts and images by reappraising the time, energy and importance you put into any certain thought or event that has caused dysfunctional thoughts or feelings. Essentially, you learn to relate to the events and cognitions in a different way. For example, experiencing an event with a patient that had disturbing consequences may lead you to have recurring negative thoughts. These recurring thoughts may keep your attention preoccupied causing you to ruminate about the negative experience. It is important to develop the ability of healthy options in coping with those thoughts. Look at the pros and cons of each option and make a decision. Sometimes you may want to consult with people who are close to you - like family or a colleague. Recurring thoughts about the same topic or event is called "churning" and you must develop the skill of stopping those thoughts and redirecting your attention to something more positive, or of a more healing nature. An activity, a thought, a distraction to something that is pleasant, joyful or peaceful would be of use. When you do this repeatedly, then your cognitive reappraisal process shows beneficial effects on your life and how you cope with setbacks, challenges, unintended consequences and disappointments. This will enable you to have renewed energy to be able to focus on the next task that presents itself. Churning tends to stress and age us and we need to learn to terminate these repetitive thoughts. There are at least a dozen important dysfunctional thought patterns that occur in the mind and brain that we need to learn to master to reappraise.

4. Attitude of Gratitude

This is an important skill for every physician. Appreciation and a sense of gratitude for everything we are, everything we have, and for the people and circumstances that we are grateful for are important skills to develop. Begin each day thinking about three people who have had a positive impact on your life. Visualize, thank them, and show your gratitude. Each night before you go to sleep think about three situations that day for which you are grateful. The opportunity to serve others is one of the greatest joys that is bestowed upon us. Be grateful you had that chance. Attitude and gratitude changes everything about our life in a positive direction. A physician's life is full of busy schedules and multiple events so a conscience cultivation of an attitude of gratitude is necessary to reap benefits in your life

5. Finding Meaning and Purpose

Most of us started thinking about a medical profession at a very young age. We may have been touched by a healer, a physician, a nurse, or were in a situation where a life was dramatically impacted by the presence of someone who cared about them. In my situation, my mother's sudden illness when I was nine years of age made a huge impact on me by not only the amount of suffering that afflicted her due to a brain disease, but also by the lack of understanding by society of how she was suffering from the negative consequences of that disease. I was touched by the presence of a healing doctor who was compassionate, kind, and attended to my mother with genuine heartfelt presence and interest. My heart was changed from desiring to become an engineer into one of becoming a physician to help others. During the busy life of a physician filled with so much stress and uncertainty, we sometimes lose track of the original meaning and the purpose of our life that we established long ago. We need to remind ourselves during these times that there is a greater purpose we are serving, and that the meaning for our struggle is something very sacred. Your spiritual attitude and holding each healing moment in a sacred manner will help you to skillfully navigate adversities. Knowing your inner purpose and finding meaning for your life gives the energy, enthusiasm and renewal to manage the obstacles you face.

6. Igniting Your Passion and Transforming It into Action

Physicians often fail to realize the enormous influence, persuasive power and impactful presence they have on others. We can ignite our passion and transform that into action to improve lives. This can make a huge difference for your community, hospital, clinic, patients, family, and for yourself. We need to move from passivity and work together to find opportunities to impact other lives. This has tremendous benefits in sparking more energy and vibrancy in us. It gives me great joy to see the positive impact on thousands of lives from the many wonderful organizations in our own communities. Physicians created the EMSA System, the Schools for Healthy Lifestyle Programs, and the Blood Bank of Oklahoma City. I had the great fortune of working with physicians and community leaders in founding the Health Alliance for the Uninsured. While serving as its first president, I took a vital role in helping pass legislation to protect physicians and health professionals, so they could volunteer from the goodness of their heart and without fear of lawsuits. We can improve the lives of our fellow physicians and advocate in a positive and constructive way for causes that could improve the care of our patients. We need to continuously be part of the dialogue that is occurring locally and nationally as to how to best care for our citizens and find more effective access and delivery of clinical care that is affordable and available to all.

7. Forgiveness - Cultivating Equanimity

It is common to find frustration, disappointment, anger, anxiety, jealousy, and sadness many times during a physician's career. These feelings are normal reactions to life's challenges whether they are of our own making, an event over which we have no control, a dysfunctional situation or a conflictual relationship. When these feelings happen on a frequent and recurring basis with great intensity and are not resolved in a timely manner, they result in significant negative consequences to our health, happiness, vibrancy and fulfillment. Unresolved anger and hostility, along with anxiety and stress, have a significant impact on our healing resulting in raised blood pressure, increased inflammation, decreased immunity, insomnia, and impaired healing. We may become two to three times more vulnerable to cardiovascular disease and CVA. These unresolved dysfunctional emotions can also sap our emotional energy and spiritual strength. Enthusiasm, compassion, patience and attitudinal issues can become significant challenges. One needs to recognize them, learn contributing factors, and develop the skill set to process and resolve them. Counseling and consultation are of great value when problems persist. Developing the skill of forgiveness is an important asset for all physicians. It removes the negative emotional, physical and spiritual energy and enables you to develop inner peace and equanimity – an even temper, mental calmness and composure.

8. Nurturing Connections

You must connect with your colleagues, your family and your community to remain healthy and happy while managing the rigors of a medical practice. Nurturing connections are critical for weathering life's challenges. We are not born to be an island. When we connect with others, magic takes place in our body, in our mind, and in our spirit. Sharing the ups and downs, successes and failures, doubts and uncertainties of everyday medical life has enormous benefits to you and your profession. Nurturing connections become the foundation on which our life becomes rejuvenated, renewed, and hope is created. We can be a healing presence for one another.

9. Finding Joy

Despite the complexities of our daily life as a physician, we need to find time to cultivate joy in simple events, interactions, relationships, and actions. Happiness is not something that happens when you are of a certain age; when you have a certain amount of money, or when a special event occurs. Happiness is "*right now*" if you choose to create it. We need to cultivate the sense of joy in each interaction and each moment. Our mindful presence and awareness of our sensations as we experience the world and its activities are essential for a healthy and productive life. Finding joy also entails a healthy balance for yourself in terms of nutrition, exercise, spiritual practice, creative activities and hobbies and nurturing family relationships. These create joy in our life.

10. Making a Difference

The purpose of all we experience during our medical career is to make a difference in the lives of others. What a privilege! Few people have as close a connection to others in distress as we have; and very few have the daily opportunity to touch another person's life. We can be a healing presence in their struggle, survival, and revival. It is a gift, a blessing, and an honor to daily serve others.

"In our sacred journey as physicians, authentic compassion, in addition to knowledge, skills, and wisdom, is vital in healing of those suffering. It is a catalyst that brings hope, strength, and potential to cope with *what IS* rather than staying stuck in rumination over what we would like it to be. Let no change or challenge take these wholesome and reverential healing moments away from us."

~ R. Murali Krishna, MD, DLFAPA