



BURN BURN BURN

Dr. Farya Rehman

We often hear about the dangers of burning out. Our program coordinators and senior residents always remind us to make sure we're taking care of ourselves. Yet, you never think it's going to be you. We are lulled into this false sense of security thinking that the danger of burnout is at the far end of the tunnel. Little do we know, it's a mirage and it's closer than you think.

I always thought I had a good handle on burnout. I never thought it would happen to me. I mean, I'm an Emergency Medicine resident, my soul basically feeds off of stressful situations. At one point during the past year, during a week of evening/night shifts that were bombarded with COVID patients and a 4-hour commute to work every day, I started feeling worn down. I started to dread going to work. I was irritated at my patients and very annoyed with my coworkers. I needed a break but I didn't recognize the signs until one sleep deprived and exhausted moment, I recapped a syringe. Something that had been drilled into our brains from Day 1 to never do. I just did and pricked myself in the process. This was in the middle of the COVID pandemic and this patient was known to have COVID. The last piece of tape that was holding me together disappeared. I held my composure long enough to find a private place where then everything I was holding bottled inside spilled out — all the exhaustion, stress, self-deprecation and fear mixed with some salty tears just came forward.

I realized that I was lying to myself. I had been in denial. I had reached the end of the tunnel.

I was burnt out.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout — a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that is accompanied by feelings of lack of accomplishment and loss of personal identity. It is caused by multiple factors; lack of control, high stress environments, unhealthy lifestyle, poor sleep, unrealistic expectations for oneself, and a lack of support system.

ARE YOU BURNT OUT?

The medical field is known to have increased rates of burnout, depression, and even suicide in physicians. It is the detrimental effects of stress that tend to be the culprit, the hidden killer.

It is important to recognize that wellness is not just “fluff” that our program coordinators keep trying to tell us to practice. Those mandatory wellness lectures are not there to take

away our free time. We must recognize that wellness is an important factor in our education and career. We must take time to check in with ourselves. How do you do that?

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Do you dread waking up in the morning? Have you lost motivation to go to work?
2. Have you become irritable with co-workers? Do you feel detached from your patients?
3. Do you find it hard to concentrate? Are you making more mistakes while writing notes or placing orders?
4. Do you feel that you haven't done enough? Do you feel like you're lacking in achievements?
5. Are you overeating, oversleeping or using drugs to feel better or to not feel?
6. Are you troubled by physical complaints such as unexplained headaches?
7. Are you preoccupied with work when you are no longer at work?

If you've answered yes to any of the questions above, you are most likely burnt out or are on your way to burnout.

I'm burnt out. Now what?

HOW TO COMBAT BURNOUT?

Work hard, play hard! With the shift changes, studying and trying to maintain a semblance of a social life, many of us find little time to commit to a healthy lifestyle. Often times, we tend to snack on unhealthy food during a shift or not eat at all. I, myself am guilty of drinking more coffee in an attempt to stay more alert on a shift than water. As doctors, we advocate good nutrition and the importance of exercise to our patients, but how many of us follow our own advice? Exercise and nutrition play a key role in maintaining wellness. Poor nutrition and lack of exercise can lead to mood swings, poor productivity, and lifelong health problems. To combat this, eating healthy snacks throughout a shift between patient encounters can help reduce post-shift binge eating. Prioritizing drinking water over coffee during my own shifts, has personally made me feel more energetic than caffeine alone. On days off especially after a string of shifts, I know most of us tend to want to sleep or catch up on our endless list of chores rather than breakout the workout shoes hiding in the back of our closet. But, exercise has been shown to decrease stress and improve energy and our overall sense of well-being. So change your routine, start some physical activity, or join a group activity to keep exercise fun and enjoy all the benefits.

Get that beauty sleep! In our specialty, where our shifts often end with the sun rising, birds chirping and the majority of the world coming into work saying "Good Morning!", sleep issues are inherent. Working while sleep deprived has shown a decrease in peak performance and an increased risk for making errors. As residents, we attempt to manage our sleep deprivation most commonly with caffeine. However, healthier strategies include, transitioning shifts from day → evening → nights, sleeping in dark rooms during the day or exercising closest to the time you want to be most awake. It is important to prioritize your sleep. Being a resident means you're mostly busy and we often feel like we can do anything

with some caffeine on our side, but being sleep-deprived not only makes it more difficult to get your tasks done properly, it can put you at serious risk of harm.

Talk it out! Whether you reach out to co-workers, friends or family, support and collaboration helps you cope. As Emergency Medicine physicians, we see patients on the worst days of their lives. We carry the burden of responsibility for their lives on our shoulders. It is okay to ask for help to share that burden. Take time to express your feelings and vent. Patients in the Emergency room are generally going through a stressful time, if you have exhausted yourself and are filled with stress, how can you help relieve the stress of others? So talk it out! Speak to coworkers who have most likely experienced what you are going through. Take their advice.

Inhale, exhale and repeat! Practice mindfulness. Being mindful is a state in which we are able to be present but not overwhelmed by our emotions, surroundings or actions. Taking 10 minutes every shift to be mindful has been shown to improve stress control and provide insight to one's emotions.

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