Burnout in Oncology Nurses: A Call to Action

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ASBMT Feb 28th, 2014
Grapevine, Texas

Overview

- Define terms compassion fatigue and burnout
- Describe scope of the problem in oncology
- Identify risk factors for burnout
- Self-evaluation
- Prevention of burnout

Compassion fatigue

- Compassion fatigue can lead to burnout and results from repeated exposure to the suffering of others.
- Individuals who suffer from compassion fatigue experience symptoms akin to post traumatic stress disorder even though the trauma was not their direct experience.
- In effect these nurses “feel the pain” of their patients so acutely that they experience side effects of this painful experience.
- It also results in poor quality of patient care.

Burnout

- Burnout is described by Maslach as “a syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of low personal accomplishment that leads to decreased effectiveness at work.
  - Emotional exhaustion: pertains to “people-work” where the practitioner is exhausted to the degree that they feel unable to give of themselves on a psychological/emotional level.
  - Depersonalization: cynicism towards patients; a negative view of patient families
  - Diminished feelings of personal accomplishment: feeling devalued, dissatisfied with one’s work and work related outcomes

“I envision hospitals as places of suffering and I see nurses sweeping it all up. Then I wonder what they do with all that suffering after they have gathered it up?

- A. Jameton, From a panel discussion at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute in Nursing Ethics. (1983) Medford, MA
### Scope of problem in oncology

- Nursing professionals caring for people with cancer deal with an onerous burden of stressful situations on a daily basis such as:
  - having to deliver devastating news about diagnosis and prognosis
  - Caring for people experiencing pain, symptom distress, and suffering
  - prolonged direct personal contact of an emotional nature with a large number of patients
  - supporting patients and their families at the end of their life


### Prevalence in pediatric oncology

- We surveyed over 400 physicians in pediatric oncology - 78% had at least moderate levels of burnout.
- In our multidisciplinary pediatric oncology study (N=48), 100% of our sample was burned out.


### High rate of burnout before and after an intervention

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRE</th>
<th>POST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal accomplishment</td>
<td>CONTROL</td>
<td>High - 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INTERVENTION</td>
<td>High - 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>CONTROL</td>
<td>High - 11</td>
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<td></td>
<td>INTERVENTION</td>
<td>High - 15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depersonalization</td>
<td>CONTROL</td>
<td>High - 22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INTERVENTION</td>
<td>High - 21</td>
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### PSS-14 : Controls and intervention

Both groups' average scores were more than one standard deviation higher than the national (United States) average, suggesting higher than average levels of perceived stress in this group of health care providers.

### Nursing shortage contributes

- Nursing shortages leading to understaffing compound the problem of burnout.
- There is a 2-3x increase risk of burnout with poorer patient to nurse ratios
- More than 40% of hospital staff nurses score in the high range for job-related burnout
- More than 1 in 5 hospital staff nurses say they intend to leave their hospital jobs within 1 year

Consequences of Burnout

- Burnout can lead to a deterioration in the quality of care or service provided by the staff, and an increase in medical errors leading to poorer clinical outcomes and decreased patient satisfaction.
- It contributes to job turnover, absenteeism, and low morale.
- It is correlated to self-reported indices of personal distress, including physical exhaustion, insomnia, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and marital and family problems.
- It may be associated with serious psychiatric co-morbidity including major depressive disorder and even suicide.


Risk factors for Nurse Burnout

- Personal
- Interpersonal
- Professional
- Health care system


Personal risk factors for burnout

- Younger age, female gender
- Idealistic perspective
- Over involvement/inappropriate boundaries with patients
- Perfectionism
- Low self esteem
- Lack of a spiritual practice
- Cumulative losses
- History of psychiatric disorder

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Interpersonal factors for burnout

- Conflict with colleagues
- Unsupportive managers
- Low team morale
- Depressed, angry, or psychotic patient /family members
- Poor communication among staff

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Professional risk factors for burnout

- < 5 years experience
- Exposure to death and dying (especially of children)
- Patients with uncontrolled symptoms
- Moral and ethical dilemmas
- Treatment errors
- Oncology practice

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Health care system risk factors for burnout

- Increased workload
- Understaffing
- Increased paperwork
- Chaotic environment
- Perceived inadequacy of resources
- Lack of control or input on work policies and procedures
- Working at an institution that does NOT have services available to address burnout

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SELF EVALUATION

Food for thought

- Do you feel “stressed out” by your job?
- Have you questioned your ability to keep going at your current pace?
- Do you have a regular self care regimen?
- Do you make caring for yourself a high priority?

A. Yes B. No

WHO-5 well being index

- Add up your score and multiply by 4
- What is your score?
  A. 0 - 25
  B. 26 – 52
  C. 53 – 75
  D. 76 - 100
Scoring the WHO-5

- >50: looking good
- 25-50: may want to institute preventative measures
- <25: further screening indicated

Interventions for burnout

- Developing strategies to promote well-being of health care providers is really a shared responsibility of:
  - individuals
  - employers (practice groups, academic centers, health maintenance organizations),
  - and health care policy makers.
- However most interventions rely on individuals (self-care.).

Multidisciplinary study in pediatric oncology

- Mindfulness training as an intervention
  - prospectively studied
  - has been shown to reduce burnout in health care professionals and trainees
  - but it had not been studied as an intervention for those working in pediatric oncology.

Mindfulness defined

- Jon Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as “the quality of awareness that includes the ability to pay attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally”, and as
  “a state in which one is highly aware and focused on the reality of the present moment, accepting and acknowledging it, without getting caught up in the thoughts that are about the situation or emotional reactions to the situation”.

Mindfulness in medicine

- Mindfulness training in health care professionals has been shown to improve well-being and self-compassion; decrease self-reported stress, anxiety and depression; enhance empathy, relaxation, and life satisfaction; and reduce burnout.
- In addition, mindfulness practice can help practitioners to listen more attentively, be aware of their own mental processes, recognize bias and judgments in thinking, and develop more effective communication practices.
- Using mindfulness techniques, practitioners can develop increased compassion, more effective patient communication, and improved patient outcomes.
Multidisciplinary study of mindfulness training in peds onc

- Design: multicenter pilot RCT
- Population: multidisciplinary, > 1 year experience (N=48)
- Intervention: 8 week course on mindfulness (15 hours) taught on site
- Primary outcome: Maslach Burnout Inventory
- Qualitative outcome: analysis of journals

RESULTS

Qualitative results were very positive but there were no changes in quantitative burnout or perceived stress scores

Themes From Qualitative Analysis Of Journals:

- Qualitative analysis of the 20 journals collected revealed 6 discrete themes. These included:
  1) the experience of burnout;
  2) increased inner peace, calm, joy, decreased stress and anxiety and improved ability to handle stressful situations (including physical pain) as the course progressed;
  3) increased mindfulness, self-awareness and ability to focus, set goals and make action plans;
  4) increased appreciation, gratitude and compassion, both at work and at home;
  5) added stress related to taking on the coursework entailed by study participation, although this theme seemed to be ameliorated as the course progressed; (5 participants) and
  6) benefits of support offered by colleagues.

Course evaluation results (n=12)

- Main barrier to mindfulness practice was finding time
- 58.3% of participants felt the STOP technique was extremely useful.
- 75% of participants were still using the STOP technique (25% daily)
- 90% thought that 1 hour sessions was the right length of time.
- 80% thought the format was appropriate.
- 58% reported using the sitting practice 1-3 times per week
- 75% think they handle stress better
- 66% think they relate to patients better
- 42% felt better about work
- 75% would be interested in follow up sessions

STOP

- Stop
- Take a breath
- Observe
- Proceed

So what do we do now?

- We acknowledge the magnitude of this problem
- Raise our self awareness of the early and not so early warning signs that burnout may be the direction we’re heading in.
- We prioritize self care NOW.
- Try the STOP technique when feeling stressed.
### Early warning signs

**Manifestations of chronic work related stress**

- **Psychological symptoms**
  - Frustration
  - Anger
  - Depression
  - Guilt
  - Nervousness
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Impaired judgment/reasoning
  - Low self esteem
  - Increased isolation

- **Physical**
  - Changes in appetite
  - Gastrointestinal upset / peptic ulcer disease
  - Headaches
  - Insomnia
  - Fatigue
  - Depressed immunity
  - Musculoskeletal pain, especially of back, neck and shoulders

### Major Warning signs

- You feel sick and tired frequently
- You dread going to work.
- You feel under appreciated at work.
- You are becoming insensitive to patients
- You are just “going through the motions.”

### Individual self care strategies

**Psychological**
- Positive psychology
- Mindfulness
- Relaxation
- Awareness
- Assertiveness training
- Laughter/cultivating happiness

**Physical**
- Exercise: weight training, cardiovascular, yoga
- Massage
- Breathwork
- Sleep
- Whirlpool
- Diet

**Social**
- Boundaries
- Support system
- Relationships with colleagues
- Pursuing hobbies/interests
- Work-life balance
- Time management

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Individual self care strategies

- Spiritual
  - Meditation
  - Religion
  - Community
  - Prayer
  - Reiki

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Urgent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always putting out fires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non urgent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent on others</td>
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<td>Irresponsible</td>
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Adapted from Stephen Covey. “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.” 1989

On Self care

- “It seems that our relationship with our Self is most critical to all other aspects of healing work. It starts with Self and moves in concentric radiating circles out to all whom we touch.”
  – J. Watson “Caring Science as Sacred Science” (2005)

Conclusions

- Burnout is a highly prevalent and severe problem in oncology health care providers that may be even worse in pediatric oncology.
- Self awareness of one’s position on the spectrum of work satisfaction, stress and burnout may be a key motivator for taking action.
- Current best evidence is for self care which includes psychological, physical, social and spiritual dimensions.
- However, more research is needed.

Acknowledgements

- Deborah Kramer EdD
- College of Mount Vincent, Bronx NY
- Dina Wyshogrod PhD, Jerry Stein MD
- Schneider Children’s Medical Center of Israel, Petach Tikva, Israel
- Laurence Magro MS
- Ruth Santizo BA
- John Ambrosio
- Rhonda Lieberman LCSW-R
- Montefiore Medical Center, Bronx, NY

THANK you!