Physician health and wellness amidst a global pandemic

BY F GIGI OSLER

Dr Westerberg attended a workshop on Physician Wellness hosted by Dr Osler a few years ago at our Canadian Society of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery meeting. The list of symptoms of stress and burnout resonated as typical of almost a daily state at the time and emphasised how stressful our chosen profession can be. At the same time, we chose this profession for the personal satisfaction it provides almost daily. As intimated by Dr Osler, as professionals we need to “check in...listen to...and monitor ourselves...” for the betterment of our patients.

“Physician burnout and poor mental quality of life has been correlated with increased self-assessment of medical errors, lowered patient compliance, and lowered patient satisfaction with their care”
“Physician health experts are sounding the alarm of a potential fourth wave of COVID-19 amongst healthcare providers: psychological trauma, mental illness, and burnout”

Baseline
Feelings
- Calm
- Relaxed
- Content
Thoughts/Thinking
- Efficient in learning and problem solving
- Integration of experience in chronology of life events and/or sense of self
Physical Signs
- Rested
- Energized
Behaviours
- In control of behaviours and personal choices

Reacting
Feelings
- Worried
- Short fuse
- Regret/guilt/sadness
- Embarrassment
- Sad
Thoughts/Thinking
- Performance anxiety
- Distractibility
- Intrusive reflections/replaying
- Fears of judgement/safety
- Concern for those affected
Physical Signs
- Muscle tension and headaches
- Vigilance
- Disrupted sleeping: anxiety dreams
Behaviours
- Rechecking information
- Reassurance seeking

Reacting
Feelings
- Fear or numbnness
- Anger
- Feelings of betrayal and/or distrust
- Shame/humiliation
- Low mood/hopelessness
Thoughts/Thinking
- Self-doubt/externalizing blame
- Attention, concentration focusing and memory difficulties
- Suicidal thoughts
Physical Signs
- Increased physical symptoms
- Difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep, and/or waking up, nightmares
Behaviours
- Avoidance/procrastination
- Impaired judgement
- Reliance on tension reducing

Reacting
Feelings
- Terror or numbness
- Anger
- Despair
- Loneliness and isolation
Thoughts/Thinking
- Self-blame
- Insecurity and fears about career/future and/or blaming others
- Profound difficulty in focusing
Physical Signs
- Physical illness
- Physical exhaustion
Behaviours
- Sleep deprivation or oversleeping, nightmares
- Impaired judgement
- Risk taking behaviours or withdrawal
- Suicidal

exposure to just a few trusted sources of information.
- Check in with yourself regularly: monitor yourself over time for any symptoms of depression or distress and seek support if it becomes overwhelming.
- Gauge where your mood is using the self-assessment tool in Figure 1.

After checking in, ask yourself what you can do to keep your spirits up, recharge or move towards the green colour. Listen to your feelings and learn to recognise your signs of distress when they appear.

Peer support is another important wellness strategy during times of crises. Before checking in with colleagues, ask yourself:
- Am I listening, communicating, and connecting with all my colleagues?
- Am I a courageous leader and colleague or am I succumbing to my own fears and projecting them onto others?
- Am I inspiring others and providing a context for them to exercise courage?

Sir Winston Churchill is credited with saying, “Never let a good crisis go to waste”. Once the initial wave of COVID-19 subsides, an early stability sets in with an opportunity for our brains to reset to the new crisis conditions. This early stability phase is an opportunity for a transformation and change; an opportunity to think differently about our physical and mental health. If the COVID-19 pandemic were to have any silver linings, could it be to shine a more public light on the importance of physician health and wellness?

Join the discussion and we’ll see you in Vancouver, Canada. Find more information at www.ifos2021vancouver.com and follow us on Twitter @IFOSVancouver.

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Figure 1. Graphic adapted from Road to Mental Readiness, Canadian Armed Forces © October 2017 Drs Kerri Ritchie & Caroline Gérin-Lajoie, The Ottawa Hospital.

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