

Caring for Each Other During the Pandemic

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As I stumbled through my third-year rotations desperately trying to weed out the specialties which I could easily eliminate, I found myself on the adult Heme-Onc ward caring for dying cancer patients. Each day, while my fellow classmates were rushing in and out of their patients' rooms frantically gathering the necessary information for rounds, drawing blood, pushing platelets, and avoiding any conversation or even eye-contact, I was sitting down next to my patients' beds engaged in deep conversation about their lives. I was more interested in the people behind the diagnoses, ANC, platelet counts and their experiences of living and dying. You see, I had just lost both my parents 3 years earlier, one to bladder cancer and the other to congestive heart failure. I was accompanying those dying patients as I wished I could have accompanied my own parents instead of being away at college. It was traumatic and cathartic at the same time.

No one on my clinical team knew about my parents. No one asked how I was coping with so many dying patients. There were no medical student support groups, counselors, or mentors to go to as I relived my parents' deaths. I dealt with it on my own and did my best to make sure my resident and attending liked me and believed I was doing a good job in order to get a good evaluation.

From the beginning of our clinical rotations in medical school, we are taught to stay detached and put "patients first." We are all experts in repressing our feelings, putting our heads (and hearts) down, and getting to work. But too often this just leads to resentment and burnout.

Now, as we enter the "chronic stage" of the COVID-19 pandemic with all of its uncertainty, medical providers are being asked to continue to do whatever is necessary to care for patients; all the while, worrying about exposing family and friends to this virus. The hero signs and cheers are fading, and we are once again left with the emotional impact of our work without adequate support.

What if all health providers had someone we could turn to in times like these? What if we were all looking out for each other, allowing each other to be openly afraid and angry? What if we could let our guards down and admit to each other that we don't want to be heroes, but just want to help, while still caring for ourselves and our families? What if our healthcare leaders could create a space where we all felt truly invested in belonging to each other? I believe all of this is possible.

Physicians were already suffering from burnout at alarming rates before COVID-19 hit. Our continued call to action and self-sacrifice can only make the situation worse UNLESS we all contribute to a culture of compassion for ourselves and each other. Here are some small concrete suggestions for how we can do this. Try one or two each day.

- Spend 5-10 minutes each morning in meditation, body movement, prayer, or some centering practice before encountering the news of the day.
- Check your own internal weather forecast each day to understand what you bring to your encounters with others (e.g. “Cloudy with periods of rain and sunbreaks in the afternoon”)
- Stop and ask one clinical colleague each day how they are doing, and truly listen to their answer.
- Reach out each day to one support staff member with empathy and say a kind word of gratitude or affirmation. Be specific and in the moment. This can also be done in a note form later if you choose. (e.g. Tell your M.A., “I noticed how kind and patient you were with that family. You inspired me to be more patient today. Thank you!”)
- Look for one opportunity to inject humor into your workplace each day. (e.g. Share a funny story, meme, or appropriate joke with your colleagues.)
- Look for one opportunity to ask for or accept help when offered to you. Remember how good it feels to have someone else accept your offer to help.

If we all asked each other how we are coping and honestly listened to the answers; if administrators and front-line workers were open with each other about their struggles and fears, each day, we might be better equipped to fight and outlast this pandemic.

I believe we can come out of this crisis with an entirely new culture of a caring community. But this is only possible if we invest in self-compassion, creating space in our lives and hearts to care for ourselves and each other, bringing abundance to our patients instead of an empty tank.