

Mindful Medicine Corner With



Dr Cecily Havert

Snuffing Out the Flame of Burnout

Last year I had the honor of participating in a Contemplative Medicine Fellowship, a unique year-long program offered through the [New York Zen Center](#) in Manhattan. The cohort consisted of medical providers from various specialties including primary care, cardiology, palliative care, psychiatry, and orthopedic surgery. One thing in common with many of the clinicians in this program was a feeling of burnout, the experience of feeling emotionally and physically empty and not connected with what had previously been meaningful and fulfilling. This is something that many of us can relate to, regardless of our profession or role in life. Burnout is real, and it's creating an enormous amount of suffering in our world today.

So what is the anecdote for this state? Can burnout be overcome? The approach of the Contemplative Care Fellowship was to infuse compassion into our daily interactions as a method to combat burnout. Compassion is a key component in Buddhist practice; it is the fuel that moves us forward on the spiritual path to awakening. Furthermore, there is science that backs this up. In [Compassionomics](#), a book by Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzairelli, research has shown that compassion improves mental and physical health, as well as professional success and longevity.

Snuffing Out the Flame of Burnout

One recommendation we hear often as a treatment for burnout is to practice self-care. That's a form of compassion, right? Well, yes... and no. While this is true on some levels, self-care can actually be a form of detachment from our life rather than connection. Some self-care practices over time have become isolating and rests on the individual to achieve it. That can produce pressure in and of itself. Alternatively, finding ways to connect with others and have compassion for what we do everyday may actually alleviate more suffering in the long run.

Putting compassion into action using connection can be tricky. However, the Fellowship outlined a few steps that can be a helpful approach. Much of this allows for getting into the moment and letting go of the unhelpful narratives that are sometimes attached to certain aspects of our jobs.

1) Pause - before entering a stressful meeting or interaction, actively stop what you are doing and return to the moment. Take some deep breaths and feel your feet on the floor. This is a grounding technique that disconnects you from whatever negative belief that you were about to bring into the interaction that most likely was not going to serve you.

2) Beginner's Mind - once you are more grounded, open up your mind. Let go of your negative biases and invite curiosity in instead. There is no reason to bring suffering into the room with you. Curiosity and compassion will continue to ground you.

3) Bearing Witness - this is all about connecting. Enter the situation and truly listen using an open mind. This is not always easy as you may be facing conflict or suffering and your protective defences are likely engaged and ready to fight. Instead of pushing back however, let it in. You are, at this moment, practicing empathy and you are poised to answer this with compassion.

Snuffing Out the Flame of Burnout

By using these three steps, you can meet burnout head-on and perhaps even find love and passion once again for what you do everyday. Even the mundane can seem meaningful when we connect with others on some level. During these trying times when everything seems heavy and burdensome, let compassion offer you some solace as you dim the flame of burnout.