

Burnout and the Importance of Self Care in the Health Industry

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By Gordon Pitts



Dr. Natasha Sharma discussing the Dangers of the Burnout and the Need for Self Care in the Health Industry at the Michael G. DeGroot's Ron Joyce Centre on behalf of the Michael G. DeGroot Health Leadership Academy on February 8th 2018.

In the early 1970s, society seized on a word to describe the excessive, debilitating stress afflicting people in the health-care and helping professions.

It was “burnout” and it gained initial currency among nurses, doctors, social workers and others on the front lines of caring for people.

Almost 50 years on, the word has penetrated every corner of modern life -- to the extent that 40 per cent of Canadians, according to surveys, report suffering from it.

“I am also someone who has reached the state of burnout, more than once,” said Dr. Natasha Sharma, a therapist, author and speaker with a Toronto practice working with individuals, couples and families.

She was speaking to a collaboratorium talk of the Michael G. DeGroote Health Leadership Academy, a joint venture of the DeGroote School of Business and Faculty of Health Sciences at McMaster University.

Burnout is still an acute problem among the helping professions, people “who are giving of themselves emotionally,” Sharma said. But they are joined by other categories of extreme risk, including parents of young children, students, public figures, and high achievers in any walk of life.

In this environment, looking after oneself, or self-care, becomes critical.

“We promote it but we don’t practice it,” said Sharma, who has a commerce degree from McMaster and is now a PhD student in psychology.

She added that people often treat self-care as self-indulgence, when in fact it is essential to practice it every day.

Boundaries are a big part of Sharma’s prescription against burnout.

People have to set explicit demarcation lines between personal and work lives, she said, adding it is a large challenge in a high-stress environment with so many people taking their cell phones into the bedroom at night and reaching for them first thing in the morning.

How do you know you have burnout? Sharma outlines three broad categories of symptoms:

- Physical and emotional exhaustion, including increasing illness, headaches and feelings of sadness – as well as an inability to focus;
- Detachment and disconnection, as displayed through added pessimism and a lack of pleasure and joy in life;
- A feeling of being ineffectual and hopeless, often manifested through apathy and irritability and thus a declining productivity – the very thing that high-performance people seek to achieve.

Sharma said burnout is often present when people feel a lack of control and an absence of personal autonomy in a high-demand environment.

She linked the feeling to the speed of technological change, as every new day is faster in its demands than the previous one. Meanwhile, the brain's processing speed is not keeping pace. Our brains, she said, "are not biologically prepared for the speed of life."

Her talk covered a number of self-care strategies:

- In the search for boundaries, learn to say no, even to good things in life, if you are in danger of becoming deluged with demands.
- Strive for balance, not perfection, in your life.
- Work on producing results, then easing off and taking more spare time, rather than continuing the constant grind of seeking productivity.

Leaders should acknowledge the burnout potential, discuss the problem with the team, and help set boundaries between work and leisure.

Most critically, leaders need to lead by example, as family members, parents and in the workplace. A leader must allow for people to self-advocate for a balanced life and to feel comfortable saying “I’m overworked.”

Sharma herself was a once a marketer for an international cosmetics company, based in London England and jetting around the world.

But she realized that the surface glamour masked the deeper reality that this life was a poor fit. She was struggling with burnout. That led her to exit her dream job and return to study psychology.

It was a form of self-care -- a case of practicing what she is now prescribing for others.