



A Well-Run Organization Is an Antidote for Stress and Burnout

Description

Part Five of a Six-Part Series

Over the past month or so, we've been looking at how leaders can help organizations navigate stress, burnout, and trauma and refill their own emotional bank account as well as those of their employees. We've talked about the importance of assessing where people are on the [well-being spectrum](#), [destigmatizing](#) mental health issues, leading with [empathy](#), and making [meaningful connections](#) with employees.

All of these are important. But now let's turn our attention to another important part of the well-being formula. A healthy organization really requires a two-pronged approach. We need to focus on the individual *and* the organization.

We often treat stress and burnout solely as an employee problem. We approach it by treating the employee. This makes sense, but it's only part of the solution. Along with helping individuals build resilience and manage stress and burnout, we need to look at how we might be exacerbating the problem.

In other words, we need to do more than generate coping mechanisms. We need to fix the internal issues that frustrate people. Upstream interventions to deal with the cause of stress and burnout are better than downstream tactics to deal with them after they happen.

Stress and burnout often originate from not being a well-run organization. Certain practices create a culture of chronic burnout: heavy workloads, leaders who may not be well-trained in areas like communication, processes and procedures that generate unnecessary problems, and so forth. On the other hand, a well-run organization has a huge impact on people's well-being.

Back in 2015, George Ford, MD, and I collaborated on a book called *Healing Physician Burnout: Diagnosing, Preventing, and Treating*. In it, we discussed that sometimes we treat the symptoms of stress and burnout and not the root cause. By that I mean, if somebody acts out, we're going to deal with the acting out. If things are getting in the way of their performance, whether it be lateness, inconsistency, or caustic behavior, we're going to address those symptoms. But are there some root

causes creating the symptoms? If so, we certainly need to address these issues too. That is why in *Healing Physician Burnout* we focus so much on creating the kind of culture that makes it easy for doctors to practice medicine.

It's a good idea to take a best-odds approach for employee wellness. Create a well-run organization and a culture that sweats the small stuff. Often it is the little things that lead to stress and eventually to burnout. It's the "pebbles" we trip over, not the Grand Canyon. The little roadblocks that keep us from being as helpful and useful as we want to be can turn into hugely frustrating stressors. A well-run organization really impacts people's well-being.

A huge part of the leader's role is giving people the tools they need to do the job. Training, of course, needs to evolve with changing circumstances. Right now, it is really important that leaders are well-versed in the fundamentals.

Sometimes we drift away from the fundamentals a little. But in times of crisis, we must bring ourselves back to them and make sure they are hardwired. We need their good results, and the structure they provide, more than ever.

In times of great stress and uncertainty, it may also help to understand the Job-Demand-Control-Support (JD-CS) model. This popular theory, published in 1990 by Karasek & Theorell, can help an organization tackle burnout at scale. Essentially, high job demands and heavy workloads place a lot of stress on employees. However, individuals can better manage this stress when they feel a sense of control over their job and a sense of support from their supervisor and colleagues.

You can see how this requires well-trained leaders who know how to strike the right balance between giving employees autonomy and knowing when and how to intervene. Being able to shape employees' work lives is not easy. That's why leadership is a skill set, one that must be mastered. No one is born knowing how to lead.

Great leadership takes training, and plenty of it. Creating the conditions that foster a culture of mental wellness is an integral part of that training. Every leader behavior, every tactic, every process, and every procedure that goes into creating a well-run organization either supports that wellness or detracts from it.

One more point: The best leaders know how to help employees connect back to that all-important sense of meaning and purpose that keeps us going when times get tough. Often, when people are burned out, our immediate thought is "decrease their workload." We all know, of course, that this is not always possible. But often it's not the right answer anyway. Many times, the key to healing burnout is not less work—it's more meaning.

Being able to help employees connect to that sense of meaning—and rediscover (or perhaps discover for the first time) what it feels like to make a difference—is crucial to cultures that promote and support good mental health. That's what we'll talk about next week: what a culture of well-being looks like and how to create it.

If you'd like to access a few relevant resources—The Well-Being Handbook (eBook), The Well-Being Tool Kit, and The Well-Being Video—please visit <https://thegratitudigroup.com/faculty/quint-studer/>.

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