

CARING **FOR THE** **CAREGIVERS**



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*While nursing is one of the most rewarding professions, it is certainly one of the most stressful jobs, too. Working in a high-paced environment where helpless people are in pain and die, the caregivers also battle their own tragedy of burning out. Could enhanced spiritual awareness help prevent burnout? **THINK** Magazine discusses the topic with **Dr Michael Galea**, Senior Lecturer of Mental Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Malta.*

Nurses are often praised for their work, and they should be. They are heroes; they look after sick and injured people when doctors are tending to a seemingly never-ending lineup of patients, as life goes on. In the meantime, nurses are there to support patients recovering or to support them in their palliative care. The rewards of being there for people in such a vulnerable situation are hard to describe. But nurses are also exposed to vicarious trauma – or secondary trauma – which means that they inevitably absorb the grief of their patients. This fast tracks burnout in this venerable profession.

The definition of burnout spans a varied scale, based on the approach of the person describing it. More often than not, however, burnout is defined as a disparity between input and output in a usually work-related scenario. 'Burnout is the difference between what one gives and what one receives, especially at work,' Galea says.

BURNING THE CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS

Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter have come up with a widely used tool, the Maslach Burnout Inventory™ or MBI, for measuring burnout, which has three main components:

personal accomplishment or the fulfilment a job offers to people; emotional exhaustion caused by the burdens of the job; and depersonalisation, which means how people look at other people when they are in their working environment.

In nursing, these three pillars are of utmost importance. The working conditions and benefits provided to nurses who take care of our family members and us must be sufficient to ensure that their professional fulfilment is at high levels so that they do not get close to emotional exhaustion and do not end up in the depersonalisation stage. The higher the burnout of a person, the lower their overall health and well-being.

Qualitative research in the field, which is still limited for the time being, though interest is picking up, has shown that the physical and moral environment of nurses is conducive to an increase in burnout. Burnout brings a plethora of issues for the individual and society. In the nurses' cases, they become unenthusiastic about their job in the short term, possibly leaving the profession in the long term. An exodus of medical professionals, whether for work abroad or traversing industries, is tragic for the sick. Research has also suggested that burnout positively correlates with illness-related absenteeism and workplace violence. ➤

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'In other words, the more I am burnt out, the less I find fulfilment in the work I do. Even if that's a job that one day used to please me. My environment may have changed, or I could have changed, and what once used to give me a lot of satisfaction is a long-gone history,' Galea says.

While in another scenario on the client side, burnout may not be detrimental (we all meet grumbling people every day, and it should not affect us), in healthcare professionals, the effects are amplified. 'In the case of healthcare professionals, we are talking about patients. So when I look at my patient, do I see just a number? Or a human being who needs compassion and help? Respect. How will I provide that if I am physically and emotionally drained?' Galea says.

SPIRITUAL HEALING?

Available and on-going research on the relationship between spirituality and well-being (including burnout prevention) suggests positive outcomes. In fact, it appears that spirituality supports the holistic well-being of nurses. Research has found

that strategies to build the personal strengths of nurses include reflection, building positive and nurturing professional relationships, managing positivity, developing emotional insight, and achieving life balance and spirituality.

Psychologically, the concept of spirituality is broader and more extensive than religiosity. It transcends religious practices and can provide emotional and mental support. It helps people with becoming more altruistic towards their surroundings.

Galea's research further supports these findings and suggests that spirituality may be an important potential source of resilience for nurses who risk burnout in their employment. Subjective well-being clearly corresponds to burnout in his research. Well-being correlates positively with personal accomplishment and negatively with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. Spirituality was consistent with personal efficacy, well-being, emotional stability, and conscientiousness.

But what can we do about this? First, we need to understand the nature of burnout. 'It is not an isolated reality

but connected to a variety of factors. Vicarious trauma is one of them. The pool of personal traits of the nurse is another. Working conditions, pay, and benefits are yet other important aspects of burnout,' Galea says.

Nurses must be well-paid and well taken care of – it is non-negotiable. The same applies to teachers, doctors, and other professions. Professionals who educate our children, treat the sick, or handle dangerous and vulnerable situations must always be well-rested, continuously trained so they have appropriate tools and knowledge at their disposal, and last but not least, given sufficient funding so they do not have to deal with existential crises in their free time.

'We need a holistic approach. Beefing up pay is one part of the equation. Debriefing, which deals with emotionally processing and discussing traumatic events encountered at the workplace, is another essential exercise that should happen to support the mental health of healthcare professionals. The working environment must be supportive towards healthcare professionals,' Galea says.



Dr Michael Galea
Image courtesy of Hush Studios

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Galea's research, in line with that found elsewhere, indicates that a healthy nursing environment must be all inclusive and not focused exclusively on the medical realm. Factoring in other related aspects, such as spirituality in this case, but also cultural sensitivity and other factors, provides a better understanding and assistance to the patient, aiming at their holistic well-being. **T**

