Easing Doctor Burnout With Mindfulness

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According to the nurse's note, the patient had received a clean bill of health from his regular doctor only a few days before, so I was surprised to see his request for a second opinion. He stared intently at my name badge as I walked into the room, then nodded his head at each syllable of my name as I introduced myself.

Shifting his gaze upward to my face, he said, "I'm here, Doc, to make sure I don't have anything serious. I'm not sure my regular doctor was listening to everything I was trying to tell him."

I smiled. To hide my embarrassment.

I had walked into the exam room to listen to this patient; but my mind was a few steps behind, as I struggled with thoughts about the colleague who'd just snapped at me over the phone because she was in no mood to get another new consult, my mounting piles of unfinished paperwork, and the young patient with widespread cancer whom I'd seen earlier in the day. Thoughts about my new patient jumbled in the mix, too, but they came into focus only after I had pushed away the fears that I might have neglected to order a key test on my last patient, that I'd forgotten to call another patient and that I was already running behind schedule.

That relentless inner conversation came to mind this past week when I read two studies [1] on physician burnout and mindfulness [2] in the current issue of The Annals of Family Medicine.

Research over the last few years [3] has revealed that unrelenting job pressures cause two-thirds of fully trained doctors to experience the emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion characteristic of burnout. Health care workers who are burned out are at higher risk for substance abuse, lying, cheating and even suicide. They tend to make more errors and lose their sense of empathy for others. And they are more prone to leave clinical practice.

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