PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Self-Care for Effective Caregiving

Autocuidado para uma Prestação de Cuidados Eficaz

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Caring means being present, without judging, stripped of our values, experiences and beliefs. It means accompanying with humility and honesty from the other's place, or using a popular saying, putting ourselves in someone's shoes. It means attaining whatever emerges from the patient's reactions and "be like a cliff, against which the waves continually break, but it stands firm and tames the fury of the water around it" (Marco Aurelio).

That's a demanding task, principally if we consider two things that instigate each other. The first one is that emotions are contagious, and we easily react to what we perceive as threats. Polyvagal theory puts us in a fight or flight mode, in a reaction mode, that however, due to the phylogenetic evolution we can transform into an action mode. If we are aware, we can co-regulate the emotions we perceive and not react as a mirror. The second thing is the multitasking that is imposed on clinicians, leading frequently to an auto-pilot mode of action. It is expected

from clinicians to attend simultaneously to a huge number of demanding tasks and responsibilities, some of them going besides the scope of medical obligations.

The struggle to attain the needs of the patient and family, in a not friendly workplace, with limited human and technical resources, puts the clinician in continuum stress and might compromise the care he offers.

This doesn't mean we have to be more demanding with yourselves, but instead, the same way we use compassion, empathy, care and acceptance towards others, we should use it towards ourselves. We can´t forget that the clinician is a great part of the "medicine", that we only take care well if we care of ourselves, that the quality of our lives affects the quality of our patients' lives. For that matter, self-care is not a luxury or a selfish attitude, but instead, it should be regarded as an ethical and clinical imperative. Self-Care should not be understood as a palliative practice to alleviate the emotional exhaustion of the clinician, but rather as the cultivation of self-awareness.

Self-awareness is the core. It promotes the transformation we experience in face of the patient's suffering and keeps the balance in favor of a vicarious post-traumatic growth and a compassive satisfaction. When this balance is lost, we face burnout and compassion fatigue, an epidemic nowadays.

Compassion fatigue and burnout are not inevitable, but can be prevented and treated. This prevention comes from the cultivation of the inner curriculum, from our self-knowledge. Quoting Michael Kearny, "our inner life determines the quality of presence we bring to the bedside of the patient and the cultivation of our inner curriculum determines our resilience to an environment we do not control". This reinforces the need to integrate it in our daily life, as well as a need to change the paradigm to a proactive prevention of burnout and compassion fatigue. Topics like self-care and self-awareness should be part of the medical curriculum and integrate during the medical graduation, something that is already happening in some colleges. For instance, think of the example of first responders and imagine applying it to clinicians. For first responders, it is recognized the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout, so they aim to enhance the effectiveness of teams by protecting the psychological, cognitive, social, and spiritual health of team members, by implementing strategies before, during and after a task. Before they prepare and understand the potentially harmful triggers and practice stress reduction techniques. During the task, they perform continuum monitoring by peers and/or supervisors, regular breaks are encouraged, and high/low-stress tasks are rotated. After the task, end-of-shift debriefings and after-action reviews are conducted to capture lessons learned. Self-care is strongly encouraged though all the process. Clinicians have the same needs, and the Before should start during graduation, and continue to mingle during work lifetime.

Besides the incorporation of this issue in the medical curriculum, for those already graduated, there is still hope and opportunities to learn and integrate self-care and self-awareness in clinical activity, in an individual or a team perspective. The benefits of small changes or small steps at a time, will have a impact not only in your daily practice and personal well-being, but also in all your relationships and life.

In the individual perspective there are validated ways to increase and exercise self-care and self-awareness such as meditation and reflective writing.

Long-term meditation training is a neurofeedback training, that due to the neuroplasticity capacity of the brain, enhances subjective attention and metacognition. We start to be aware of our own thinking, and for that, we can act instead of reacting. Mindfulness is demystifying and divulgating the meditation practice. It has been used in numerous randomized clinical trials to assess the impact of meditation practice in medical conditions, as well as a tool to improve coping and well-being of professionals in the workplace.

Reflective writing is an analytical practice and not merely descriptive action. The writer revisits the scene, notes details and emotions, reflects on meaning, examines what went well or revealed to be a need for additional learning, and relates what translates to lifetime. Questions elusive to description (what happened?), feelings (what was I thinking and feeling?), evaluation (what was good and bad about the experience), analysis (what sense can I make of the situation? what else could I have done?) and action plan (if it happens again, what will I do?) are successively answered.

There are, however, more simple gestures we may integrate in the daily practice to oblige us to connect to ourselves and refrain the auto-pilot mode. Take a break between appointments. Each patient deserves the best of us, and we only offer a clean vision if we clear the mind in between appointments. If we take a step back and settled our emotion. It might sound crazy to suggest such a thing with an overwhelming agenda, but sometimes simple things just as looking outside the window and realize if it is raining

or is a sunny day, things like taking three deep breaths, are more than enough to reconnect us.

How about teams, how can they promote self-awareness and self-care? One validated way is thought Balint groups or supportive work communities like informal groups. These groups provide an opportunity where sharing thoughts, doubts, fears, allows the improvement of our inner and outer connection and coherence. It provides an opportunity for validation of perspectives, thoughts and feelings, for training communication skills and for supervision and mentoring. The essential key of this groups is a trusting, honest, and non-judgmental environment.

In this fast-forwarding society it's imperative to work in our own balance and act proactively in the prevention of burnout and compassion fatigue, more importantly when we face in daily basis the suffering of cancer patients. We must care for ourselves to care the others with dignity.

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