Suicide Care Insights: **Self-Care**

Ideas to help healthcare leaders take care of their organization, staff, and themselves.

Whether it's related to COVID, the mental health crisis, the Great Resignation, or any of the myriad of issues taxing our daily lives, there is no denying our working world has been a difficult and evolving challenge over the last several years.

Compassion fatigue and burnout have always been occupational hazards for healthcare workers, and in the wake of COVID we find ourselves trying to care for our community when we are running on empty ourselves.

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▼   **Below is a list of considerations and actions for recharging your organization, your staff, and yourself.**

Create intentional feedback loops in the organization to listen and hear feedback.

ORGANIZATION

» **When leadership prioritizes developing [psychological safety](#) for the staff in their organization, people feel safe to speak up, even they are disagreeing.**

Staff are best positioned to say what isn't working, and why they are really leaving. Is the [organization making safe and constructive space](#) for that feedback?

» **Executive leadership should be visible to all levels of the organization and not just that headshot in the atrium.**

Make time to shadow front line staff workers on a regular basis. This level of communication is invaluable towards validating the work staff do and might provide a window into the ways that to improve their work life and reduce burden.

STAFF

» **Intention does not wipe out the power differential between staff and leadership!**

Keep in mind that no matter how much you say you're "just one of the band," that does not change the power difference inherent to your roles.

» **Organizations have hierarchy, and some roles have authoritative leadership by their very nature.**

That authority can't be eliminated by saying it's eliminated. Recognize it and take active steps to attempt to acknowledge it and reduce it.

In a meeting soliciting feedback from people, don't just tell them "I want to hear what you're really thinking." Set up ways that people can communicate anonymously. This saves staff energy in having to tactfully craft critical feedback and can help you bolster psychological safety.

SELF

» **When receiving feedback (particularly dissent) treat that feedback like it is precious (because it is!)**

This is the opportunity to show staff that you mean what you say when you want feedback. Validate it, reflect it back, and then be honest and transparent about what can be done, and talk about how the organization is going to address it.

» **Pay attention to your own reaction to things. Leaders get burned out too!**

This isn't easy. Especially when the feedback is negative or it's about something you can't change. Take some deep, measured breaths. Relax your jaw or shoulder muscles. Pausing before responding or taking a moment to reflect back to the staff member can provide some space to come up with a response that is more of a response than a reaction.

An example: "Thank you for that, Keisha. You're frustrated and angry and I hear that. You want things to run smoother and be less frustrating." (This validates the feelings of the staff member and gives you some space.) "This is a standing agenda item at the directors meeting and last time we had some healthy discussion about it. I will make sure to keep you updated on our progress." (Follow through!)

Advocate for and enact policies and procedures that support healthy boundaries and work-life balance for staff.

ORGANIZATION

» **[Role overload](#) and [lack of role clarity](#) are mechanisms of burnout.**

It means that people have too much on their plate or they are doing work that isn't "their job."

It's one thing to have to pitch in and do something extra or different to help in a crisis but when it feels like the crisis is never-ending it can contribute to burnout (which will contribute to staff turnover and the "pitch in during a crisis" will continue).

» **Flexibility and autonomy can prevent or reduce burnout for some people.**

We all lead busy and complicated lives that have us juggling family, friends, and community and sometimes stuff happens in the middle of the workday. Giving people the autonomy to create their own schedules and the flexibility to work at non-traditional hours can help reduce or prevent burnout. Is this in a policy?

» **How does leadership communicate new policies and procedures?**

Is the language full of "mandatory" and "required"? And while it might be required or mandatory it's helpful to communicate the why behind it (and maybe not just "the state is requiring this") and acknowledge if this is creating additional burden on staff.

Don't just add new policies, review them to see if any are obsolete, unnecessary, or redundant (or counter other policies/procedures).

STAFF

» **Review and evaluate your organization's policies and procedures.**

On paper a policy might seem comprehensive and fair, but the procedure may be negatively impacting staff and you won't know this unless policies are evaluated. Are staff doing what is intended in the policy? Do the policies unfairly impact one group of employees over another group?

Review your organization's policies to see if they contribute to staff burnout, moral injury, secondary or vicarious trauma.

» **Consider assessing the language in organizational policies and procedures through these lenses:**

» Does any of the language inadvertently stigmatize clients/patients?

» Is the language person-first?

» What about recovery-oriented or trauma-informed?

» **It's important to evaluate organizational policies and procedures to make sure they are being implemented with equity, fairness, and in a way that fosters staff well-being.**

SELF

» **How are you replenishing yourself?**

Not everyone does self-care the same. Take some time to think about what works best for you; what recharges your battery.

Consider:

» Some people feel like the best form of self-care is saying no. "I'm not able to take on that project." "I'm not able to attend that meeting."

» Some people feel replenished when they can work on a project that feeds their passion and connects with the mission of their work; even when it's extra work.

» Self-care doesn't have to be doing things like exercise, or meditation, or going for a massage. It can be doing nothing.

When we are constantly on the go it can be difficult to slow down, if you think that resting and relaxing will help recharge you then you might need to give your brain and body some time to adjust to resting. It might feel uncomfortable at first.

» **How do you model healthy work-life balance?**

Contemplating your own forms of self-care can also help you recognize and understand what your staff does to replenish themselves. If you want staff to take care of themselves, what are you doing to take care of yourself?

» **Modeling self-care is a great way to show your staff that you value their self-care.**

Keep an eye on and consider power/economic differentials. You might get recharged by taking a vacation, or by hitting the gym before work. But what you're doing to recharge your batteries might not be available to your staff (i.e., time or economics).

Being curious about how your staff recharges their batteries can open the doors to creating a culture where self-care is valued. And, while supporting staff, you might find another way to take care of yourself.

Language changes culture. And it's free.

> You can't change the culture without changing the conversation.

ORGANIZATION

» **Don't shy away from talking about burnout, secondary/vicarious trauma, or compassion fatigue.**

Studies show that when leaders communicate an understanding of burnout, secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue, it helps staff. Recognizing someone's struggle is part of validating it. Identification is the first step to solving a problem.

» **Think about the way you and other leaders communicate to the organization.**

Is it always one direction, top down and sent in formal language via email? Effective communication is more like a roundabout or a rotary (depending on where you are in the country) than a one-way street. People come on and off in a way that promotes understanding and collaboration. Too often we think of communicating as I'm saying something or giving information, but good communication is as much about listening as it is about talking.

Take a minute before hitting send on that "all staff" or team/department communication to check language. Is it full of "musts" "have tos" and "requireds"? Is there a way to soften the language or take ownership of how this might sound? How staff might feel reading this? How would it go over if it was said out loud to a roomful of staff members? The message might need to be delivered, but what can be done about the language being used to communicate it?

STAFF

» **It's not "what's wrong with you?" it's "what happened to you?"**

The World Health Organization has identified burnout as an organizational issue, not a personal disorder. Secondary and vicarious trauma come from experiencing or witnessing traumatic incidents, or from hearing people's stories of trauma. Empathy can come at a cost.

Symptoms of secondary trauma can mimic PTSD or a trauma disorder (similar to PTSD but has lower intensity and frequency of symptoms). Trauma can rewire someone's brain to experience things as threats that might not a threat.

» **Everyone's experience is not the same.**

Minoritized staff experience layers of stressors that non-minoritized staff don't experience. Intersectionality is about how different aspects of a person's identity impacts the way they experience things in the world. If someone is Black, gay, impoverished, and lives in a rural area, they will experience stressors that someone who is white, heterosexual, and middle class in a densely populated area is not going to experience.

And groups are not monoliths. Every person who is Black, gay, impoverished and living in a rural area does not necessarily experience the same stressors or resiliency factors (same for the white, heterosexual, middle class person). But the more layers of minoritized identities that someone experiences can increase risk of experiencing burnout.

» **Be kind, give some context**

When asking (or telling) staff you need to talk to them please, let them know they aren't in trouble, they aren't getting fired, or no one died (if you can say all of these things). Honestly, it's terrible to get a message from your boss or a leader that says, "need to talk to you" and no other context.

Give a little context like: "I wanted to pick your brain about a new project." "I wanted to hear your opinion about the agenda for tomorrow's director's meeting. "I need to talk to you when you have time" has most staff members running down the hallway to find out what it's about RIGHT NOW. Or panicking and avoiding that person and conversation. Or catastrophizing for hours about what they did wrong.

SELF

» **What a person says can change the way they think about someone.**

When we have negative thoughts about the people we are trying to help, it can contribute to compassion fatigue and burnout.

People work in healthcare or behavioral health because they want to help people, to make a difference in people's lives. Stigmatizing language can inadvertently reduce meaning and characterize clients/ patients as problems or intractable and that can make it hard to see that we do make a difference in people's lives.

Consider some language that is often baked into healthcare and behavioral healthcare systems and some impactful ways it can be shifted:

Non-compliant	→	Choosing other options/having difficulty with...
Medication-seeking	→	Feels a particular medication helps best
Frequent flyer	→	Feels comfortable receiving care here and not elsewhere OR a patient with complex health issues
Addict	→	A person who uses substances
Crazy	→	A person with a specific mental health issues/disorder
Clean	→	Not using substances

Everyone is feeling the stress and strain of the current work environment from the CEO to the person working per diem. Stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue affects everyone differently. Sometimes we find things that can help many people, and other times we need to recognize the uniqueness in all of us and understand there are no cookie-cutter fixes for burnout. But hopefully this has given you a few thoughts and ideas to consider for your organization, staff, and yourself.

This resource was created as part of "Suicide Care Insights: Stories & Tips to Cultivate Your Implementation" series available at ZeroSuicide.com.