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continued conversations: Understanding Burnout in Healthcare, Part 2

Recorded July 29, 2020

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OccupationalTherapy.com Course #4772

Fawn Carson: Welcome back to understanding burnout in healthcare, part two. I'm back with Erica, and she is going to continue with this topic. So, the question I have for you is, you made a very good point about self care, that it's not exclusive to outside of work. What are some specific strategies that a practitioner can practice that can be implemented across the board professionally and personally?

Erica: So, I made up this little acronym because, brace yourself for this part two because I have several acronyms I'm going to share. It just helps me to remember everything. But I came up with this acronym for a CEU presentation I did a while back and now it has really stuck with me. And that is MELROSE. So, one word MELROSE. So the M stands for mindfulness. The E is for emotional intelligence. L stands for locus of control. R stands for resilience. O stands for optimism. S stands for self compassion, and E stands for engagement coping. And all of these factors have been shown to make positive changes in individuals that are experiencing burnout.

So, in order to practice these different MELROSE components and to incorporate them into your life, you first must cultivate an awareness, set an intention, and then of course have the right attitude. Because it's really hard to get things done when you don't have that self awareness in order to make changes in your life and to see what things are working for you or against you. And you have to be intentional about setting boundaries. MELROSE isn't a rigid regimen that you must get perfectly right every single day. So, it's about knowing what works for you and of course, having that awareness and understanding what you can take and implement, and then arming yourself, so to speak, with what you need, your toolkit, to not only manage burnout, but to have a higher quality of life.

And then having the right attitude, being open minded about shifting your attitude or perhaps you have to shift some beliefs in your life about your capabilities and your limitations. And some of these concepts might be totally new and foreign to you, and that's okay because Rome wasn't built in a day. Again, this isn't about a perfect regimen. It's about knowing what's going to work for you. So, being open about these concepts and being patient with yourself.

Fawn Carson: Okay, so you touched upon mindfulness already. What about the other MELROSE pieces?

Erica: So, E, like I said, is for emotional intelligence, and this includes the capacity to appraise, understand, manage, and use one's emotions to handle interpersonal relationships empathetically. So, having high emotional intelligence is really good for healthcare professionals because it can lead to enhance therapeutic outcomes with patients, greater patient satisfaction and job satisfaction, greater rapport with your patients, better collaboration with your team and better ability to cope with workplace stress. So, with locus of control, that's the degree to which you believe you have control over your life circumstances. And this can require a huge mindset shift because this can involve some of your fundamental beliefs about how you view the world, how the world works. And one study showed that nurses that have a higher external locus of control, so they are more likely to believe that what happens to them is not in their control it's left to outside factors.

When they had a higher external locus of control at work, it was shown that they were less likely to take action to cope with job stressors. The R in MELROSE is resilience, like I said, and this one is really popular. I've noticed a lot of topics about building resilience, and resilience is a wonderful component but it should not be abused. Because you can have the most resilient healthcare worker in the world in a job that is unsupportive and "toxic" and that resilient person will eventually break. So, it doesn't substitute for a healthy work environment. So, they go hand in hand. And I would argue that being a healthcare professional already, you are resilient. It's something that can be built and is beneficial. But I also like to add that caveat, that organizations like to focus on building resilience, but then they don't really pay attention to the working environment that can support that resilience. Far as optimism, fine. Let me ask you, have you ever watched the travel shows from the late Anthony Bourdain?

Fawn Carson: I have watched those shows, but I don't know how this refers to your talk today. Can you tell me more?

Erica: Yes. So, my husband and I loved his shows and we watched them all the time, and we noticed a really interesting theme. And whenever he was in a different country he would ask the people he was with, are you optimistic or pessimistic

about the future? And that is an accurate depiction of optimism. So, you can be optimistic and you can still experience the wide range of human emotions on a daily basis. It's not about toxic positivity. And I know that's something big right now, that topic. But things can be difficult right now. You can have a bad day. You can be going through a rough season in your life and feel hurt inside and all the human emotions, but optimism refers to your outlook. And so, optimism has been shown to improve wellbeing, and optimistic people usually tend to expect good things to happen to them. And thus, they are more likely to take action to ensure that those good things happen to them.

And pessimism negatively impacts your health. So, you can practice optimism and still not stifle any emotions you're feeling on a daily basis, but it's more about maintaining hope for the future. And optimism and confidence go hand in hand. So, that's good to know. So, there's two more components of MELROSE. The S, is for self compassion. And this for me is one of perhaps the most important tool for healthcare practitioners. I have a type A personality, and I know many other healthcare practitioners that I have spoken to also identify as having a type A personality. And we enter healthcare because we're really compassionate and we want to help people. But for those that are type A like me, I have a really hard time with showing that same compassion to myself. So, I'm a perfectionistic with my work, but I couldn't be any more harsher with myself if I tried. And at the beginning of my career, that created a really negative internal experience. And I believe it really exacerbated my experience of burnout. So, giving yourself self compassion is key. And lastly, engagement coping means that you are working on solving your problems instead of running away from them. So, that's disengagement coping, when you don't want to deal with your problems. So if you, for example, go out to dinner and go to the movies and expect that your problems will hopefully, fingers crossed, not be there when you get home, that's disengagement coping. So, engagement coping, it's helpful in the longterm when coping with stress and can play a role in burnout as well.

Fawn Carson: Do you have any tangible strategies to integrate MELROSE components in your personal and professional life? Let's start with emotional intelligence and locus of control. Tell me how you've incorporated those?

Erica: So another acronym, like I said, there's going to be quite a few of them. This is for emotional intelligence, and this is APPLE. And this is so important, it has helped me personally. And I believe I have really benefited from, instead of being so reactive to problems at work, or even outside of work, being more responsive and more empathetic. So, this is how you can practice APPLE and increase your emotional intelligence. And of course, you're not always going to remember every single letter of all these steps. But hopefully, the more you implement these practices, and again, cultivate that awareness, the more it could be automatic and smooth for you. So, A, is awareness of your emotions. Why am I feeling a certain way? So, let's take a problem that happened at work. What triggered me to feel a certain way?

And then P is pause and think, and for me, pausing is the most important one. Because if your intensity of your reaction doesn't match the situation, you may benefit from pausing and giving yourself time, even if it's a few seconds to process your response. The next P is, to proceed to express your emotions. So, again, this isn't about watering down your expression or holding anything back that needs to be said, but rather that P, that pause, allows you to process. And then you can go about, perhaps, choosing a better way to express yourself and to express your concerns. Let's say, it's a problem with a co-worker. And then L in APPLE is listen to others. So, in my occupational therapy curriculum, I learned about motivational interviewing and active listening. And we learned about that to build rapport with patients, right? But we can also implement those strategies with our team members, and of course, with people outside of work.

And instead of planning the next line you're going to say, which I'm totally guilty of. Instead of planning, you are actively listening. After re-listening and implementing perhaps some strategies you learned in school for that motivational interviewing. And then the E is empathize with others. So, you may not agree with your co-worker's point of view, and that's okay, it's not about always agreeing and being on the same page. But it's about understanding where that person is coming from. So, that takes active listening and expressing empathy. So, this not just benefits you, but benefits the team and patient satisfaction. And with locus of control, I believe this one's a little bit harder,

because like I said earlier, it's about shifting your mindset, challenging your fundamental beliefs, but you can practice different exercises.

If you believe you have a high external locus of control and you believe it's holding you back from succeeding at work, from making strides professionally or personally, then there are a few exercises. So, I'm going to share two with you. The first one, it starts by, reframing your language. So, perhaps you come across a problem at work and you think, well, I have no choice in X, Y, Z situation. You can reframe your language, again, this takes awareness and practice and you won't always get it right, but it's about being aware. So, you may think, well, I don't like my choices, but I will do X, Y, Z instead. So, this subtle shift can allow you to and open you to new opportunities that you may have not even been able to see before. And something to help you, another exercise that I really like, is making a list, like making bullet points of all the things that are causing you to worry right now, or things that you're really struggling with, and grabbing a highlighter and highlighting the things that are actually in your control.

And then I would challenge you to look at the things you didn't highlight, the things that are out of your control. So for example, perhaps you wrote down, I'm getting more PTO, right? That's something you can't control, but what are branches of that, that you can control? Maybe you think, well, there's no point of even asking for it because I'm not going to get it. You can't control if you ask for it, asking your supervisor, when you ask your supervisor, how you approach your supervisor. So, again, we get so focused on the outcomes, but we forget the steps that we can take, the actions we can take that can allow us to perhaps get that PTO. And even if you don't, it's okay, because you focus on the things you're able to control.

Fawn Carson: How about resilience and self compassion? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Erica: Yes. So, resilience, I like to sum it up in three C's. So, challenge, control and commitment. And so, like I said earlier, you can build resilience through experience. And the more you work, the more you will build that resilience. So, challenge is viewing your stressors as a positive challenge and opportunity to grow. Perhaps you had a really, really challenging caseload and it's overwhelming you, and you're stressed about it. And you needed a lot of help

that week. Having the mindset of viewing those opportunities as, wow, I really learned a lot and I grew from that. And that little twist, carrying you into the next week and how you are able to grow. And thinking about how you grew and how that relates to your goals versus viewing your challenges as stressors.

And then control. So, we just talked about that. Knowing what's in and out of your control, and then finding empowerment within that. And then last C, is staying committed to your purpose. So, why do you go to work every day? Of course, you want to pay the bills. You want to have a good quality of life and all those things. But think about why you chose occupational therapy. And in the day to day, that gets lost. I totally get it. You're not always thinking about big picture purpose every day. But if you are struggling with that resilience and struggling with that purpose, it's good to remember that and remind yourself of why you entered this profession and tie that back in with your work. So, with self-compassion, you can sprinkle that in throughout the day. And I'm a big fan of visual cues.

So, you can make a background on your phone and put it on your home screen as a gentle reminder throughout the day. If you check your phone, to say something kind to yourself. Or you can find a picture on Instagram or Pinterest, or you can make your own on Canva, it's a free service. I love that service to make little graphics. Or you could put sticky notes in your notebook at work, on your water bottle, or in your car, in your home. A gentle reminder is because, if you're like me, you're very harsh with yourself. Those cues can be very impactful. And one little exercise. This is another acronym, but this one I think is very easy to implement. And it's called BACK. So, you can have BACK in your back pocket, pun intended, when you're having a bad day. Especially when you're having a bad day, this will make your bad days more bearable.

And there's so much evidence around self compassion. So, the evidence is really compelling. And why as healthcare practitioners we need to practice it. So, if you're having a really bad day, and you can practice this in the middle of your bad day, no one even has to know what you're doing. Breathe. So, BACK, the B for back is breathe. Notice your breath. Simply notice it. Don't try to change it. Notice it. A, accept yourself as you are. Sometimes we're going to have vomit on our scrubs. We're going to be a hot mess. Our buns are going to

be falling out in the middle of the day or however your day goes that day, and it will be challenging. And you might not want to accept yourself as you are. But that is a part of life the good and the bad.

And so, giving yourself permission to accept yourself. And then C, is placing a caring hand on your body. You can place a hand on your heart, having that intention that your hand is radiating love, and putting that even on your thigh, putting your hand on your opposite arm and giving yourself that little loving touch. And lastly, the K is kind. Say something kind to yourself. You can say it out loud if no one's around you or in your head, you can say, I made a mistake, but that's okay. Or I'm doing the best I can, I still love myself. Or you can say, I love myself, even though I'm having a bad day, whatever feels natural to you. Because I know during bad days where you come home and maybe you're so depleted or you're crying in the car, that's happened to me. And I think about, I should have, looking back, I did not give myself, I felt like I didn't even deserve that kindness. So, we are deserving of that kindness always, good and bad days. So, please remember that and give yourself that self-compassion.

Fawn Carson: Okay. Last one. How about engagement coping?

Erica: So, there are two branches of this. And I'll make it really simple. There's task focus and emotion focused. So, with task focused you're focused on solving the problem. You can have support. So, you can ask your supervisor for help, or your colleague, or whoever you need to ask for help if you find that having that support is beneficial to you. Or you can go about solving the problem on your own, that's task focused. And then emotion focus is for problems that are out of your control. Perhaps you're stuck in traffic, you can't control the traffic. So, taking deep breaths. These are healthy ways of self soothing. And one study looked at adaptive strategies and maladaptive strategies, and this is not rocket science that this study talks about maladaptive strategies not being beneficial to improving subjective wellbeing. And those things included, excessive eating, over drinking, using drugs, gambling, excessive shopping. So, the adaptive coping strategies that were perceived as helping other participants cope with stress included yoga, laughter, deep breathing, listening to music, talking to a counselor so you can audit your life and audit the ways you cope with stress. Are they helpful to you? Are they not helpful to you? And

you may be stumbling across strategies you've never done before. Like meditation. Meditation was new to me a few years ago. Now, it's a really helpful strategy in my toolkit. And I recently found a new leisure activity. I started to color in an adult coloring book and that has really helped me with my anxiety. So, I feel like as occupational therapy practitioners, we can "OT" ourselves in a way and find the strategies that can help us to cope with stress.

Fawn Carson: You brought up a lot of good points. I'm sure so many people struggle with some of these concepts, especially self-compassion. As you were talking, I could see a lot of this with myself and my practice in the past. Do you have something for listeners to be able to remember all this information?

Erica: Yes. I have a one page handout, so it's easy to review the MELROSE components. So, you don't have to memorize everything I just talked about. And I want to add that it will take time. And like I mentioned earlier, Rome wasn't built in a day. So, be kind to yourself, see what works for you. Start to implement and create the changes in your life that are going to benefit you, and be committed to the self work. Because it's not about being perfect or having this rigid regimen. I must follow MELROSE every single day to a "perfect amount." But it's about taking what I've said and metabolizing it and seeing what works best for you.

Fawn Carson: As far as setting boundaries, what can occupational therapy practitioners do for this?

Erica: Oh, this is such a good one, because I have struggled with boundaries big time. And many occupational therapy practitioners that I know, including myself, have expressed that we are people pleasers and we want to be helpers. And we don't want to say no. And setting boundaries not only helps you, but it helps the people around you, your patients and your team. So, if you're completely overextending yourself and saying yes to everything, that is not going to help you in terms of longterm, chronic stress and burnout. And one study that looked at occupational therapists found that setting boundaries between work and home played a crucial role in the prevention of burnout. So, I always said yes to a lot of things at work. And then I did have that breaking 0.1 day, where I realized I was taking on too much. And I just had a fear of disappointing people. And we want to be "team players" and I get all that.

But setting boundaries and understanding what is important to you, what you can be flexible with, and what you must set hard boundaries around will help you so much in the long run in your career. And think about this in this way. When you say yes to something and you keep saying yes to something without... You're blindly agreeing to something you're not even sure you want to do it or you don't want to do it. You're also on the flip side of that. You're saying no to something else. So, you should be saying yes to things that you truly enjoy that are going to further you in your career, and that contribute to your goals and that are going to make you happy. And I get it. Sometimes we're going to say yes to things that we don't want to do that we may have to do, or maybe something temporary, like stepping in for someone that's sick, et cetera. I know those things happen. Real life happens. But I realized that the more I grew in my career and the more I set those professional boundaries, the better I felt, the more confident and empowered I felt, because I had autonomy in that. And I realized that the world's not going to end if I say no to something. Shocker, it's true. For someone, especially like me that was so afraid of saying no, the world will continue. And sometimes we have to take a step back and realize, I'm saying yes to all these things but I'm saying no to something else. I'm saying no to more family time. I'm saying no to things that are going to replenish me and to energize me to do my job better. I'm saying no to something. So, figure out what that is and that's going to help you to move forward.

Fawn Carson: You brought up the work environment and mentioned earlier the six work factors that can lead to burnout. And you mentioned job crafting. How can occupational therapy practitioners use job crafting to achieve greater job autonomy and job satisfaction?

Erica: I love job crafting. I love this concept. And to me it's such an OT concept. I think every OT practitioner should know about job crafting, because we talk about the just right challenge, right? When we're talking about working with clients and patients and greeting up greeting down, and essentially this is the same thing, but this applies to our job and grading up and down our demands and resources. And this should be done in conjunction with your supervisor or your manager. This shouldn't be done for you. You should be an active participant in

this job crafting process. This is what makes it job crafting. And there are four main components to job crafting.

You can increase structural job demands, increasing autonomy, learning opportunities. You can increase challenging job demands. So, being practically involved in a new project or a new program. Increasing social job resources, like increasing social support, mentorship, feedback. And then lastly, decreasing hindering job demands. So, decreasing the number of emotional or cognitive tasks. And I would argue that all of these factors, it depends on the season you are in, in life and in your career. And there are some important questions you should ask yourself when engaging in job crafting. And you should meet with your supervisor regularly, perhaps every six months or so, to reassess your goals. You should ask yourself, what do I need in order to feel supported? What makes me feel empowered to make choices at work? Am I in a season in my career to add more challenges or lessen them?

What does that look like? So, being very clear about that. And I feel motivated to do work when X, Y, Z occurs. So, think about what that is. For example, I feel motivated to work when I'm able to leave work at three o'clock on Tuesdays and Thursdays to pick up my son. Or I'm motivated to do my best work when I have dedicated documentation time at the end of the day. So, it's about coming up with a realistic plan that's going to work for you and your employer. And the good thing is, that there are some job crafting questionnaires online that you can find that can help you to guide this process.

Fawn Carson: Wow. That is a very OT approach. So does job crafting lead to greater person job fit?

Erica: Yes. Yes. That is so important. And I'm glad you asked because you want that high person job fit. And that is a degree of alignment between the individual and the job. So, a higher fit means you're more engaged at work and it's more meaningful to you. And we talk about, in OT, we talk about, what's meaningful to you, right? When working with patients and helping them to achieve their goals? But we also have to do that with ourselves. Like what is meaningful to us? And just because you are an OT and you have a job, that doesn't make the job meaningful to you. You have to do some soul searching and digging and find the

setting, the right job, the right team that works best for you. It's not a one size fits all. So, you have to be proactive in creating that meaning for you.

Fawn Carson: Got it. So what should organizations be doing in order to create an environment that is healthy for employees? What red flags have you seen or experienced from work environments that are not positive?

Erica: So, healthcare systems must prioritize retaining their staff. And I know this is true for many industries, including healthcare, unfortunately, that some organizations just want a warm body to come in and do the job. And in healthcare, and this is especially true in medicine, there is an outdated way still of operating that seems to exist. And there's a structure that enables silence and even enables different forms of workplace bullying. And these types of organizations also have low psychological safety. And psychological safety is the shared belief held by teammates that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking without fear of being reprimanded, embarrassed, punished, rejected for speaking up, sharing ideas, posing questions, raising concerns, or making mistakes. So, if you are afraid to ask a question for fear of being punished or embarrassed or reprimanded, how is that a positive environment for you to learn and grow as a clinician, as a practitioner?

So, psychological safety is so important. And organizations should really focus on enhancing psychological safety, focusing on employer retention, creating a positive and supportive environment that involves productive energy. So, it's high quality energy, and it's high in intensity and in quality, focusing on cultivating strong interpersonal interactions and relationships. So, team building is crucial. Also, creating opportunities for personal achievement and growth, reducing workplace stress. And this can be accomplished, we covered job crafting, and through other perhaps higher level structural components. So, modifying job demands and expectations on employees, enabling supportive supervision and mentorship for learning and growth. And then, encouraging holistic team growth, incorporating, MELROSE components could be one of those, but really focusing on that environment for healthy teams and a healthy workplace.

Fawn Carson: Yes. Feeling safe at work to take risk and ask questions is so important for so many reasons. Wow, this has been a great chat. Any last words before you leave on burnout?

Erica: Yes. So, I think about this all the time. In school, we are taught to succeed with our clinical skills, and the rest of the "soft skills" we learn on the job. Of course, you can't learn all those things in school. But sometimes we learn these lessons the hard way. And especially with burnout, that's something I didn't learn about, that's something I didn't even know could exist in such a wonderful profession. So, when it happened to me, I had no idea what was happening right beneath me. So, especially if you're a new grad, regardless of where you are in your career, you're going to make mistakes. You're going to, perhaps, learn things the hard way and maybe experience burnout. And I would ask you to just be kind and patient with yourself. It's okay, if you're not a good fit in a certain job, it doesn't make you a bad person, doesn't make you a failure. So, realize that your mental health and your wellbeing comes before any job. And knowing that you should be an advocate for yourself. Be an advocate for yourself in your job and out of your job. And maybe some of these things we talked about can encourage you or inspire you to take certain actions, to advocate for things in the workplace that can be positive for you and your team. Or maybe positive for you in your personal and professional life. So, be kind to yourself. You will learn a lot and know that burnout happens. It's not your fault. You're not weak. These are things we don't learn in school, but now hopefully you know a little bit more about burnout. And knowing that, like I said, your wellbeing comes before any job. So, take care of yourself and advocate for yourself.

Fawn Carson: Great words. Thank you so much, Erica, for a great talk on burnout.

Erica: Thank you, [inaudible 00:31:20]. Thank you for having me.