



Delivering compassion compassionately

"Research has identified three hallmarks of burnout: emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment, and de-personalization."

So wrote Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzairelli in their book "[Compassionomics](#)." Both men are physicians -- Trzeciak, a clinician and researcher, and Mazzairelli, a clinician turned CEO. Both argue that health care suffers from a lack of compassion that patients experience and physicians perpetuate. But, per their subtitle, "The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That Caring Makes a Difference," there are ways to ameliorate the situation and improve the quality of care and the lives of those who deliver it.

Their chapter on improving care by reducing burnout is relevant not simply for health care professionals, but also for the workplace at large. The above definition cites the key reasons why many managers and employees suffer burnout. They feel their work doesn't matter despite their long hours. Worse, they feel disengaged from the work -- depersonalization indeed.

The authors cite the "helpers high" that people who provide assistance to others feel. Doing so makes us feel good about what we have done. The challenge is to maintain the high, and the authors argue that the answer is to deliver compassion. The next challenge is, to deliver it, you must exhibit it yourself.

In other words, it's the old mantra "physician heal thyself." And, by extension, that applies to all of us working outside the health care arena.

Acting with compassion

Compassion ultimately comes from within us but how can we deliver it if we don't experience it ourselves? That question often comes down to a sense of self-worth. Even with highly accomplished individuals, such as physicians and executives who have achieved much, feel less worthy.

Sometimes that lack of self-worth comes from challenging circumstances in childhood or young adulthood. "When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over," wrote Buddhist monk

philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh. “He does not need punishment; he needs help. That's the message he is sending.”

As a result, they achieve to achieve because they are seeking self-validation. Achievements thus become milestones to be checked off a list but not to be savored and enjoyed. Sad.

To feel compassion you need to act with heart. So easy to say, but acting with heart means adopting the “other self” mindset. Again, to quote Thich Nhat Hahn: “The source of love is deep in us and we can help others realize a lot of happiness. One word, one action, one thought can reduce another person's suffering and bring that person joy.”

Make personal connections

Think small, therefore. Make the personal connection with another. And when you do, take joy in the moment. Do not expect it to be greater than it is. Slowly but surely moments will add up and in time, and over time, you will derive the energy that comes from compassion.

The authors close this chapter, as well as the book, with this comment, “Even when compassion can't ‘make a difference,’ it makes a difference.” That statement nails down the key aspect of compassion. It's not about just us; it's about all of us.

As with leadership, even when you think people don't need you, think again, because they do. Your active involvement in the lives of others matters because we all want to feel connected to others.

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