Burned Out on Burnout

Real Solutions to Reclaim Joy and Meaning in the Practice of Radiology

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Disclosures

• No financial disclosures
Burned Out on Burnout

- Burnout, moral injury or human rights violations
- Physicians are suffering
- A million patients lose their physicians to suicide/yr
- Many more are leaving medicine or desperate to get out
- Brain drain of the brightest students to Wall Street
- Massive physician shortages in the future
• Meaning and fulfillment should be inherent to the practice of medicine
• We are suffering because we have lost our ability to focus on what matters most.
• We are strong. We are already resilient enough. It's time that we started acting like it.
• We can use our unique combination of intelligence, creativity and grit to take back control of our personal and professional lives
• Pay attention to our attention!
• The problem in our lives is not the lack of time or money but the scarcity of our attention
• We are filled with thoughts, worries and to-do lists swirling around in our heads
• We need more presence and peace yet...
• Most of us, myself included, spend large portion of our attention in a low quality, widely distributed manner
• We want to unplug from daily stressors but most of us never really do
• We can do better
• The cultivation of attention can have profound effects on both our personal and professional life
• Rapid increase in overall unhappiness in doctors
• Comprehensive approach that addresses root causes of suffering
• Attention Capital Theory in Medicine - ability to cultivate and direct our attention is our most precious resource
"Wealth of Information Creates a Poverty of Attention" - Herbert Simon (1971)

- The most meaningful aspects of medicine are the time spent using our talents to alleviate suffering
- Daily contribution of hard work, knowledge and experience that can heal someone who is hurting
- These interactions provide meaning, joy and impact
- Increasingly hard to experience and dwindling in both frequency and duration
- Rewarding interactions are our “physician zone”
- To fully experience these “peak” interactions, we should be free of distractions, fully immersed in the task at hand and connected to the suffering before us
The path to reclaiming joy and meaning in medicine is to cultivate the ability to direct our attention on valuable activities while minimizing the rest of our tasks

- When we can design environments and create habits that enable us to spend more focused time in our physician zone, we will be more productive, connected and fulfilled
- We are bombarded with massive amounts of information
- Our ability to process large amounts of data has remained constant
- Imbalance between higher/more complex inputs and our stable processing ability led to increasing fatigue, error, unhappiness
Unlimited in ability to retrieve old info stored in long term memory but fixed capacity to handle new inputs

Highly sensitive to cognitive load of input - optimizing working memory is the key!
• Relevant load is signal that enhances our ability to effectively process and retain new information
• Extraneous (irrelevant) load is noise from our environment (distractions) or the way the information is presented (workflow interruptions, inefficiencies/EMR/self-editing)
• Since we cannot often change the complexity of the problem before us, we should focus on reducing noise
• Noise = distractions (external and workflow)
• External distractions are found in our habits and environment (smart phones, email notifications, other low value activities)
• Workflow distractions include disorganized manner in which info is presented (multiple screens) and additional tedious steps needed to complete main task (data entry during patient encounter or self-editing)
• We need strategies to help us focus our limited working memory on things that matter (relevant cognitive load)

• In radiology (and at home), we can identify the critical activities/interactions that bring us the most satisfaction and meaning.
Increase Relevant Load (Signal)

- The cultivation of attention (improved WM performance) can be made easier by increasing the difficulty of our work.
- When the challenge matches our skill, we are engaged
- Increased engagement correlated with higher productivity, quality, and overall well-being
- Too little difficulty for our skill causes fatigue and boredom (EMR clicks, pre-auth, self-editing, charting)
Increase Relevant Load (Signal)

- The degree of difficulty of our professional work is especially relevant to the practice of radiology
- “The Law of Diminishing Specialization” - Peter Sassone 1992
- Computers eliminated clerical positions resulting in short term savings
- Executives spending more time on low value tasks resulted in higher cost, less efficient, lower productivity -> less engagement, higher fatigue and less professional fulfillment
- Underlying theme in medicine - physicians are performing tasks well below their skill level. (Shift of transcription (self-editing), billing (EMR) to high cost FTEs)
- Short term gain but long term pain - very high cost in terms of productivity, quality and well-being of physicians
Increase Relevant Load (Signal)
Decrease Workflow Distractions (noise)

- Optimize our “physician zone time” - focus our attention to do what only we can do
- Use of editors to offload steps in reading process allow us to stay in interpretive zone
- Reading room coordinators to triage calls, requests. Relevant clinical info
- Scribes for ED/internal medicine to enable face to face interactions with patient
- Split-attention effect - dispersing attention between patient/image and EMR/VR screen increases extraneous cognitive load —> increases fatigue and lowers performance
- When physicians are able to optimize their physician zone time through more focused attention and delegation of clerical tasks, they are more productive, accurate and happier
Another significant cause of poor S/N and lower WM performance are external distractions (mainly in our pockets).

Our minds are hardwired to focus on anything that is threatening, pleasurable or novel.

Many of the distractions found in our phones are designed to combine all three aspects and can be very difficult for us to resist.

Large companies have hijacked our attention using behavioral psychology and addiction principles for their own profit.

We can incorporate some simple strategies that allow us to be more intentionally present and engaged in each moment.
Decrease Irrelevant Load (Noise)
Simple Strategies to Start

- First step - turn off all notifications except text messages. No sounds or alerts on lock screens or computers
- Remove social media, email, games from phone - use it like Jobs intended (talk, text, music)
- Leave your phone in backpack or drawer and check it only after working in short sprints of 45-60 min
- At home, leave phone in central place (charging drawer, foyer) rather than in your pocket
- Put phone in airplane mode at least one hour before bed
Decrease Irrelevant Load (Noise)

Kids

- For kids, daily limits around total screen time and social media use (UnGlue)
- Leave phone in another room while studying (short sprints)
- No phones in bedrooms, central charging place
- No phone use in car or restaurants
- **Constraints create freedom and attention**
Pay Attention to Time

- Tempting to blame all of the busyness and discontent on distractions and smartphones
- Key is understanding why we seek distractions
- Usually to relieve some inner discomfort or boredom
- Time used to seem endless when we were younger
- **Our ability to pay attention to our time is the main thing that has changed as we get older**
- **Hedonic Adaptation**
Pay Attention to Time

- Solution to boredom and routine is to cultivate attention and novelty about everything we do
- We impose constraints to help us really pay attention to what we are doing
- We can find new things about the task, different ways to do things, and notice something that we never noticed
- This provides novelty and infuses sense of wonder/fun into our lives
Pay Attention to Time
Simple Hacks for Novelty

- Playing catch with my son again? Can I turn it into a game or ask different questions for a deeper conversation?
- Reading another 100 cases today? Can I make a really good pickup that can explain the patients symptoms?
- Can I relate each study to someone I know?
- Doing another thyroid bx? Can I treat this patient like I would treat a close friend? What suffering of theirs can I alleviate?
- Feeling stuck in my career? What skills can I acquire to help solve important problems in the world?
PAY ATTENTION TO EACH OTHER!!

- Physician-physician relationship demands our attention
- Grown up in competitive lone wolf culture
- We learn to hide our insecurity to maintain our edge
- We bury emotions and self-medicate to hide pain
- Lack of cohesiveness has been exploited by others profiting from our labor
- We are seen as a fragmented, overpaid whiny bunch who must be “taught” how to handle the business of healthcare
PAY ATTENTION TO EACH OTHER!!

- Physicians are reluctant (rightly so) to discuss mental health issues
- We finally have a confidential formalized peer support for physicians by physicians (physiciansconfidential.com)
- Rather than grinding thru our worklist, racing to retirement or side gigs, we can turn our attention to the suffering around us
- After discussing cases with colleague, ask them how they are doing? How are things at home? Do they make it to kids games?
- Working with struggling physician? Spend regular time with them. Let them know they are not alone. Encourage them to seek confidential help.
- These are the moments that matter and we must learn to pay more attention to them
Highlights from Positive Psychology

• Scientific study of human flourishing
• Happiness as a transient emotional state
• Gratitude journaling forces us to pay attention
• Mindfulness - paying attention on purpose without judgement to each moment (training gives better control of the flashlight of mind’s attention)
Next Steps/Road Map

- Match work to skill level, delegate low level tasks
- Create rules to eliminate distractions (for you and kids)
- Pay attention to each other
- Pay attention to the good in your life (gratitude journal)
- Introduce novelty into your daily routine
- Meditate - train mind to pay attention to your attention