

## Burnout: What Community Cancer Centers Need to Know

by Charles M. Balch, MD, FACS



Burnout is a very defined circumstance. It occurs in individuals under constant pressure or stress over a long period of time. It is characterized by two or more of the following:

- Emotional exhaustion.
- Lack of interest or enthusiasm for work.
- Physical exhaustion.
- De-personalization and the flip side of that character trait—a lessening of compassion. When we lack compassion, and we begin to treat patients and co-workers as impersonal objects.
- Decreased sense of personal accomplishment.
- Ineffectiveness and decreased productivity.

### Why is Burnout So Important?

We get to burnout slowly—one day at a time—and often don't even realize that we've changed. What often allows people to get into trouble with burnout is a very strong defense mechanism called denial. Be aware, however, that burnout is *not* depression. Burnout primarily relates to an individual's effectiveness on the job. These men and women can leave work and have a very normal existence, but their job-related activity is compromised.

There are two sides to this syndrome. On the one side is stress, which is an over-engagement when emotions are over-reactive and the demeanor is one of anxiety and hyperactivity. The flip side is when emotions are blunted and the demeanor is one of depression, detachment, helplessness, or hopelessness.

Most physicians go through burnout at some point in their career. Accordingly, it's important to understand and recognize burnout in our-

selves and others so that we can be as proactive as possible to mitigate the adverse consequences of burnout that can be tragic.

For all of us who work in the oncology environment around cancer patients if we are going to be compassionate about patients and if our patients are facing death, there is an emotional toll that wears on us unless we take the time to renew and compensate for that toll.

### Helpful Tools and Strategies

Our work environment has an impact on what we do and how we function, so burnout is something those responsible for the workplace environment—supervisors, administrators, and so forth—should be cognizant of. Accordingly, community cancer centers should initiate an open dialogue to talk about burnout—not just for our profession and out of compassion for our colleagues, but because there is increasing evidence that burnout is associated with decreased quality of patient care and increased incidence of medical errors.

Personally, there are steps we can take related to being self aware and taking a more proactive stance in favor of a healthy lifestyle for ourselves and our colleagues. Here are 10 questions that can be a starting point for self-assessment or be used in mentoring other staff.<sup>1</sup>

1. Is there consistency in how I want to live my life and how I actually live it—both personally and professionally? In other words, do I know my priorities in life?
2. Where am I most irreplaceable? At home? At the office? Elsewhere?
3. Do I have adequate balance between my personal and professional life?
4. How much personal achievement am I willing to sacrifice to have more personal time or a better relationship with my family and children?

5. Am I asking more of my spouse and children than I should?
6. What kind of legacy do I want to leave my children?
7. What personal activity have I been neglecting?
8. If I could re-live the past year, how would I spend that time?
9. What will my life look like in 10 years?
10. What do I fear?

I also recommend two articles by medical oncologist/hematologist Tait Shanafelt, MD, at the Mayo Clinic.<sup>1,2</sup> His work is organized around five steps:

1. Identifying core values.
2. Ensuring career-shaping optimization.
3. Identifying practice-specific stressors. (These will vary from practice to practice and include the chemistry of those who work around us.)
4. Achieving a balance between personal and professional goals.
5. Nurturing personal wellness strategies.

These resources are especially important for young people starting out on their journey as oncology care providers as a way of saying—self-awareness and work-life balance is important in your professional career. 📌

---

*Charles M. Balch, MD, FACS, is professor of surgery, oncology and dermatology at The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore, Md. In 2009, Dr. Balch received ACCC's Clinical Research Award.*

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Shanafelt TD. A career in surgical oncology: finding meaning, balance, and personal satisfaction. *Ann Surg Oncol*. 2008; Feb;15(2):400-6. Epub 2007 Dec 12.
- <sup>2</sup>Shanafelt T, Chung H, White H, Lyckholm LI. Shaping your career to maximize personal satisfaction in the practice of oncology. *J Clin Oncol*. 2006;24(24):4020-4026.