

Burnout and Balance: How to Go the Distance in the 21st Century

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Introduction

In October 1991, off the coast of New England, a combination of atmospheric and related weather conditions created the “perfect storm.” The combination of wind speed, tide changes, ocean temperature, and barometric pressure created a weather monster unlike that ever detected in the past 100 years. The 6-man crew aboard the *Andrea Gail* sailed into this inferno and perished.¹

Medicine in the year 2004 is also in the midst of a “perfect storm.” The financial conditions of most medical delivery systems are perilous because of a unique combination of factors, any one of which would be irrelevant if taken alone, but the combination is buckling the knees of organized medicine.

- *The fade of the stock market.* The privileged and well-connected benefactor and donor no longer have the reserves to shore up philanthropy.

- *Changes in Medicare coverage.* As every clinician and administrator knows, Medicare cutbacks on the delivery of services have created a financial nightmare while fixed costs continue to escalate at a double-digit pace.

- *The aging of the American population.* We are now in the midst of one of the greatest migrations in the history of the world as 77 million baby boomers are entering their postretirement years — when they will have the greatest need to access the healthcare delivery system.²

- *The blistering pace of technology.* Keeping up with advances in technology is expensive and requires considerable resources to bring to the bedside.

Another factor that is not often articulated is the changing relationship between the patient and the provider. The Internet has completely shifted the balance of power so that the patient oftentimes has more factual knowledge than the provider in the management of illness.

Also, an issue clearly disheartening to the provider community is the absence of any meaningful tort reform in most states. Physicians in some eastern and southern

states have curtailed services. Emergency rooms have been closed, and elective procedures have been delayed to bring the crisis in malpractice litigation to the attention of the legislatures.³

Burnout Among Healthcare Professionals

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that physicians, mid-level providers, and other healthcare workers are under siege. What is the clinician to do? What can the nurse do? What can any of us do to deal with these difficult issues? “The best way to predict the future is to invent it.” This quote by Alan Kay brings home the reality that we need to change what we can change and accept what we cannot change as our personal journeys unfold.

The facts and figures are chilling. Depending on the specific specialty or region of the country, burnout rates among physicians of 40% to 70% have been documented.^{4,7} The high-risk groups are primarily those involved with ongoing clinical responsibilities such as emergency departments, infectious disease, medical oncology, and general medicine. Internal medicine residents in one study reported a burnout rate of 76%, and that was related to substantial care on a monthly basis.⁸

This phenomenon is also reflected in *Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* by Richard A. Swenson, MD. In this book, Dr. Swenson documents that two barometers of stress in the community are the proportion of the population actively undergoing psychiatric care (40%) and the percentage of us at risk for a clinically significant psychiatry meltdown (approximately 33%).⁹

It is fascinating to examine the lives of longtime, durable educators, political figures, athletes, and entertainers, as well as healthcare providers. What are the “secrets” that we can learn from them? Although each individual is unique, there seems to be at least five characteristics of these individuals that “keep the fire in the belly.”^{10,11}

1. Conditioning

The future belongs to the fit. Without a modicum of stamina and endurance, it is difficult for anyone to weather

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the storm in the current medical vineyard. At a minimum, we have been encouraged to walk approximately 20 to 30 minutes each day. The Surgeon General has underscored the need for walking 1 hour a day, but for many individuals that is unrealistic.

Starting at age 30, most of us start to lose about 1% of our muscle mass per year. That means that over the span of a 30-year career, without some type of intervention, we will have lost one third of our muscle mass and strength. Therefore, most sports medicine experts and physiatrists have recommended an aggressive weight-lifting program. This typically would consist of 8 to 12 repetitions to the point of mild fatigue, which is called one set. One set, done two or three times a week for the major muscle groups, is a step toward restoring and maintaining muscle mass.

As we become older, our muscles are replaced with adipose and scar tissue. This is a setup for a fall, and a broken hip can be disastrous. Aggressive stretching programs involving 30 to 60 seconds of quiet stretching for major muscle groups is crucial to “go the distance.” A study of the careers of high-performance individuals such as Roger Clemens (a 300-game winner for the New York Yankees), Tiger Woods, and Lance Armstrong clearly demonstrates the benefits of this aggressive stretching program. Admittedly, few of us are world-class athletes, but we need to view ourselves as athletes to preserve our physical fitness.

2. Concentration

The ability to eliminate distractions for a limited period of time and to drill into a specific task is important. It is easy to become distracted with cell phones, e-mails, faxes, and the indiscriminate knock on the door. We need to be proactive and assertive, and we need to recognize that for some activities of clinical care, we cannot be interrupted.

3. Connectedness

John Donne, a 16th-century poet, coined the phrase, “no man is an island.” None of us goes the distance alone. We all know what happens to the calf or the doe separated from the herd: They do not live to retirement. Study after study has shown that marriage and committed long-term adult relationships are strong buffers against the slings and arrows of the modern world. The friend, the colleague, the confidant are essential if we are to go the distance.

4. Compartments

A unique characteristic of individuals in positions of high stress and high tension is the ability to “leave the job at work.” They handle difficult, contentious, and incendiary issues during routine working hours and somehow have the gift and the skill to put the “nasty stuff” into some sort of a box or container. They zip it up with duct tape and then quietly put it on the shelf and go home. If we take

this stuff back into our caves and cottages, it can easily erode our domestic tranquility.

Most of us are people of good will who try to do our best under difficult circumstances, and thus it is sometimes difficult to turn off the lights. However, if we take it home with us, we will not go the distance.

Let me share a fascinating story. Several weeks ago while on a hospital assignment, I visited a gentleman in his early 80s with far-advanced cancer. We discussed some limited options, which were potentially palliative, and the patient clearly understood that our goals were finite. I was curious about his occupation, and he shared with me, “Dr. Creagan, on average, I bury 80 people a day.” Being a rather inquisitive type, I asked the gentleman what he did. He shared with me that he managed one of the largest groups of funeral homes in his community. Being interested in burnout and stress, I asked him how he was able to handle the stress each day. He made it clear that he symbolically touched his building when the day was over, and this was a mental note that the job was over, the professional portfolio was closed, and he would then go about his normal family life until the next day. He shared with me that if we cannot leave it at the office, we will unravel in the current technology world.

5. Complacency

Medicine, and the world in general, are changing at a blistering pace. Gordon Moore, PhD, was an engineer who coined Moore’s law in 1965. Moore noted that every 2 years, the capacity and the speed of computers would double. We know that he was right on the money — currently most of our processors are three to five times faster than they were several years ago. Let me get specific. Approximately 5 years ago, the “speed” on my computer was 200 megahertz. One can now go to a retail outlet and buy an off-the-shelf laptop with a speed of more than 3,000 megahertz (3 GHz). Several years ago, the capacity of our hard drives was 1 gigabyte; today, hard drives of 120 gigabytes are common. This means that if we do not embrace technology, it will crush us. It is not always fun, and it is not always user-friendly, but each of us needs to make the effort to understand the role of technology in our lives or we will become frustrated and unhappy campers.

Discover Your Purpose

Another important dimension to survivorship has been addressed by Oprah Winfrey in a recent issue of her magazine.¹² In this issue, she states, “The work of your life is to discover your purpose and to get on with the business of living it out.” She challenges us to recognize that every one of us has a purpose — a calling — for being here. We need to find that passion and follow it with the tenacity of a rottweiler. She also writes, “We were all born with this

fire, but beginning in childhood, we let others snuff it out.” Passion is the fuel, the log, that keeps the fire of purpose blazing, and we can never let it extinguish.

In short, we each have gifts, we each have skills, but unless we take care of ourselves, we will never be in a position to take care of others.

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