

Tug of War

Category: Gratitude

written by Pamela Adelstein | November 19, 2021

A tug of war lives within me, and my physical body and soul are struggling mightily. Gratitude pulls one end of the rope, and burnout yanks the other. I feel immensely grateful that I can meaningfully contribute to people's care during the pandemic. I've triaged, tested, talked with and tended to countless patients since COVID-19 began. I am blessed with wonderful family, friends and community plus a job with deep purpose and meaning. Each workday I feel enriched by those around me. I have the tremendously gratifying privilege of witnessing my patients' truths, holding their grief and sharing the intimacies of their life.

The flip side of gratitude is the emotional, physical and psychic energy needed to maintain this level of output. Since the pandemic began, medical care as we knew it was flipped upon its head. Our systems needed to be rebuilt, our knowledge base expanded and our understanding of patient care revised. This has taken a profound toll on me and countless others. I have stress headaches. I minimally participate in meal preparation with my family. I am less available to spend time with friends because I am either working or taking time to recharge.

I struggle to answer the question, "Are things getting better at work?" Our patients are sicker than before. Patients need additional physical and emotional support, however fewer resources exist due to pandemic-related changes. The entire health care team is taxed by the increased work needed to compensate for understaffing. Patients are understandably stressed and frustrated when they hit roadblocks in their care. Patient visits are longer and more intense, which makes charting more detailed, which takes more time, which makes us fall behind. Paperwork burden has grown, and again, there are fewer team members to assist, so greater burden falls to providers, which makes us again fall further behind.

Most of us medical providers are Type A and are accustomed to keeping up, completing tasks at a high level and feeling in control. Yet there is only so much time in a work week, and so much oomph in our being. This tug of war plagues me because I desperately believe in the mission behind my work, and I truly want to persevere. Yet my spirit is wounded with no time to recover. I feel utterly and hopelessly stuck. And, I am trying to remain alert for movement in my metaphorical rope.

Pamela Adelstein

Newton, Massachusetts