

Cleaning Out Your Emotional Junk Drawer

Most people pile a metaphorical “junk drawer” with stress and unresolved emotions that spill over once the drawer is filled. This mental clutter can be cleaned out—but it’s an ongoing process to avoid further buildup.

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It’s no secret that health care providers are at high risk for burnout. In my time as a provider, a patient, and a supportive companion to family members, I have witnessed too many of what I call “walking dead” providers—those who barely function in their jobs, leave the profession reluctantly, or count the days until retirement.

One key to avoiding burnout is self-care. I know, you’ve heard this before. But knowing something and *acting* on it are entirely different.

In my case, it was my employer who broke down my self-care barrier. Through the hospital I work for, I received repeated invitations to participate in free workshops. The first email read: “Healing loss workshops provided for interested staff.” The workshops were based on the Kübler-Ross model (otherwise known as the five stages of grief). First introduced by Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969, the model postulates a series of emotional reactions to loss.

At the time, I thought grief and loss were only about someone dying. I didn’t know that it could encompass other forms of loss, such as relationships, jobs, physical mobility, major rejection, childhood dreams, or children. So, even though around this time I was in the middle of a divorce, ending a 20-year relationship, breaking up a family, and leaving a house I had lived in for two decades (talk about grief and loss!), I deleted several of these messages before I decided to consider the invitation.

Even when I did, my reason for filling out an application was based on the fact that the workshop, food, and lodgings were free—and I would receive continuing edu-

cation credit! My mindset was focused on what I could gain tangibly rather than emotionally. I was surprised when I was accepted as a participant—and unaware of how much this experience would change both my personal and professional lives.

I arrived for the two-and-a-half-day seminar with no expectations. I knew that the workshop was touted as providing a safe, comfortable, and confidential environment in which facilitators and staff would provide education on and tools for healing. It was emphasized that this was *not* a form of medical therapy and that participants could choose to discontinue the workshop at any time. The goal was for participants to learn how to resolve inner issues they have built up and carried around with them.

It is difficult to explain in words the internal change that took place within me during my first workshop. The group participation helped me to recognize that everyone carries a mask. Behind that mask, every individual—strangers, colleagues, patients, even family—has his or her own story and journey. Witnessing others sharing their personal pain and grief in a confidential, nonjudgmental environment made me more compassionate.

But I also learned more about myself than I expected to, including that I need to continually take care of myself. Otherwise, I will carry baggage with me wherever I am. And the contents of that baggage came as a surprise to me. Yes, I was dealing with loss in my immediate life—divorce, moving, etc—but I became aware that my earlier life experiences were impacting my current behaviors and relationships.

It was difficult for me to conceive that my

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loving parents, who had given me food and shelter, had neglected my emotional needs. I love my parents, but the resentments I uncovered during that first workshop startled me. I realized that, while they did not overtly teach me prejudice, their actions caused me to cultivate a general distrust of others. They would often say, "Don't tell anyone." I now understand that this cast others as untrustworthy and suspicious.

The memory that encapsulated this best for me was of one summer, when I returned home from traveling abroad and was unable to find my old toys (which were always in a large cardboard box in our garage). My parents didn't have any explanation for where they had gone. I continued to search the garage for years, literally, not understanding how the toys had disappeared. It was only many years later, when the subject of the toys came up in a conversation with my

recognized just how much anxiety, anger, fear, and stress I was carrying. I started to understand how to "unpack" this extra weight. Although I was exhausted as I left the workshop, I also felt much less stressed and lighter.

Some of the changes I've made as a result might seem subtle to an outsider, but they have made a huge difference to me internally—and *that* seems to reflect onto the people surrounding me.

The biggest complaints I hear from hospitalized patients are that "nobody tells me anything" or "they come in with one leg out the door." So now I ask for permission to enter the patient's room. I introduce myself, then ask if it's OK to sit down with them. This seemingly small action makes such an impact. I began to notice that, in response, patients were thanking me for coming to see them, for listening, and for spending time with them.

The best example I have is a hospitalized patient who had undergone major surgery. She was upset about her care and getting frustrated with staff. I had seen her once before, and when she looked up and saw me at the door of her room, she said, "Oh, let her in! I know she's really 'here' with me." What a confirmation that this simple change of mindset on my part is helping to make a difference in the care I deliver to my patients!

I realize many of you might be as skeptical as I was when I read the first workshop invitation. You may be thinking, "This won't help me." I understand your doubts—I shared them. But that first workshop was so inspiring that I felt compelled to share my experience with others. I believe in the benefits so completely that I pursued training to become a voluntary facilitator. It is indescribable the results I witness in participants. I can only encourage you to give these types of workshops a chance. (If you are uncomfortable about doing a workshop with coworkers in attendance, or just want to do some traveling, workshops are available in many states and different countries.) A simple search for "internalization/externalization workshops" could change your life as much as it did mine! **CR**

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mother, that she replied, nonchalantly, "Oh, your father threw them out." It's no wonder I had issues with trust!

I often hear people say, "I just want to forget about what happened to me," "I don't want to think about my past," or "I buried all that old stuff." But if I learned one thing from these workshops, it's that life experiences do not stay buried. I carry the effects of my experiences around with me without being conscious of it. The workshop taught me how to acknowledge my grief and loss and work on becoming more emotionally available. I learned that it is OK to be angry about my parents' behavior and to express my emotions about it, while still loving my parents very much. Acknowledging these suppressed emotions and the effects they had on my life has helped me to grow and move forward.

By the time the workshop ended, I had