

Managing physician stress in the ICU

VENKTESH RAMNATH, MD

UC SAN DIEGO HEALTH

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Objectives

1. Understand the importance of addressing stress in ICU physicians, esp during COVID-19
2. Learn tools to use in the moment, after the moment, and before the next moment of stress

My Background

Spent 10 years as ICU director in community and academic hospital settings across US, Africa, India, Indonesia

Medical Director for Critical Care and Telemedicine Outreach for UC San Diego Health

Worked alongside palliative care physicians, chaplains, social workers, psychiatrists, ethicists in shared decision-making models

Why does self-care matter?

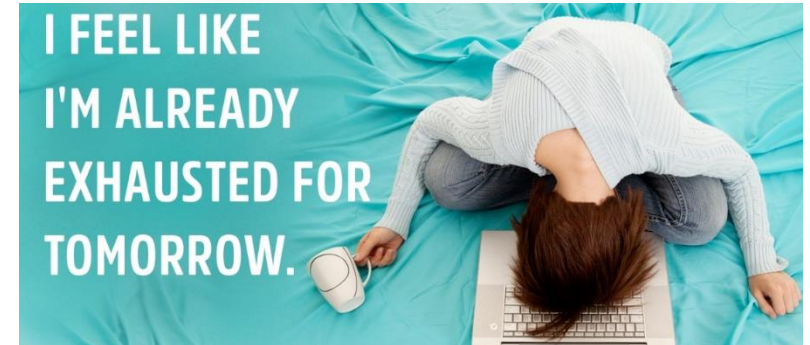
Mood disorders in physicians are highly prevalent and were already worsening in pre-pandemic times

Medicine is like being on front-line of war

- High stakes: medical errors hurt people
- Death
- Loss of sleep
- Overwhelming circumstances (info overload, volume of patients) → hyperstimulating environment in the midst of fading productivity

Physically demanding

Emotionally demanding



COVID-19
made things
much worse

“Stress is part of the job”

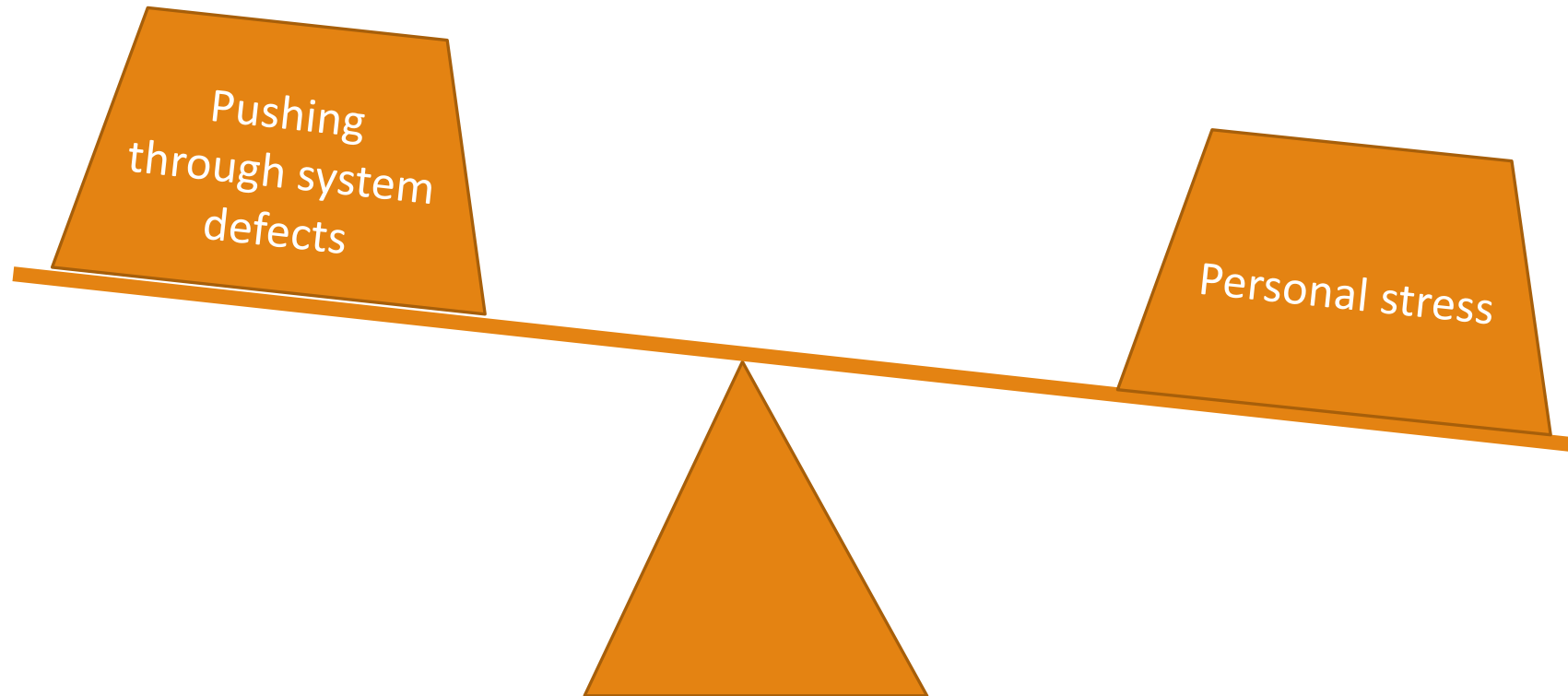
ICU is stressful for everyone: patients, families, but all of us providers as well

As high performers to enter medicine, we are used to pushing through all obstacles

Healthcare is fragmented/inefficient; achieving the best interest of the patient not always transparent or possible



Realizing there is a trade-off



This is not just “burnout”

Moral dilemma

Moral distress (individual morals vs. system values) → Moral residue

Moral injury → burnout. Manifestations:

- Depersonalization
- “Compassion fatigue”
- Feeling of isolation
- Physical and mood disorders
- Suppressed/repressed emotions
- Substance abuse
- Recurring nightmares and flashbacks

Some suggestions

1. What to do in the moment
2. What to do right after the moment
3. What to do before the next moment

In the moment: “hit the pause button”

1. Learn to be self-aware. Start observing yourself.
 - Body posture, tone of speech, mental and physical fatigue. Recognize triggers.
 - It all starts with interoception.
2. Do not self-judge.
 - Learn to forgive yourself.
 - It's ok to be angry, frustrated, sad.

In the moment: “hit the pause button”

3. Make proactive (rather than reactive) choices around these feelings to get through the moment

- Remember there is a beginning and end to everything
- Choose when, how, to whom you express what you feel.
- Demonstrate moral courage. YOU are in control.

4. If it is too overwhelming right now, stop and ask for help immediately.

After the moment: process it *internally*

1. Turn off stimuli and be with yourself.
 - Turn off phone notifications.
 - Be in nature.
 - Exercise.
2. Reflect on past experiences that may be similar/different.
 - How did you handle other crises in the past, professional and personal?
 - What worked or didn't work?
3. Create “the fence”

After the moment: process it *internally*

4. Seek out or ask for a HEAR (Healer Education Assessment and Referral) program at your institution

5. Engage in one-on-one counseling and/or psychotherapy/psychiatry

6. Read books, listen to podcasts/music/other

- Peter Attia (The Drive), Harris (10% Happier)

After the moment: process it *externally*

1. Write about it (journaling), paint, play music. Express your feelings.
2. Talk to SOs, friends, parents and those who helped you through difficult times in the past
 - How did I get through internship? A bad breakup? A loss of a family member?
3. Talk to trusted colleagues, supervisors
 - Participate/build a team around these issues to share experiences and find solutions.

After the moment: process it *externally*

4. Talk in the community as a professional

- Kiwanis/Rotary group

5. Make something your own as a private enterprise.

- YouTube videos, entrepreneurial venture, consultant

6. Write and contribute on a larger platform

- The Conversation. Op-Eds.

Annals of Internal Medicine

Moral Injury

Venktesh R. Ramnath, MD

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Before the next moment

1. Have a plan. Doesn't have to be perfect.
2. Realize that this is a journey
 - Constructivist approach, learning health system
3. Be open to change (of yourself and others)
4. Don't disparage or suppress your thoughts and feelings.
 - The power of the collective: your voice must be heard!

Critical Care Doctors Are in Crisis

Who's caring for the ICU physicians?

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Summary

You are not alone!

Develop self-awareness and other practices to handle yourself in the moment

After the experience, take time to process what happened both internally and externally

Prepare for the next moment as part of a learning process

Make your voice heard – change comes with the power of the collective