HERE'S A SECRET ...

We Are Treating Burnout All Wrong

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I heard a distinct "pop"—the death knell for my state-of-the-art universal remote—and responded like any logical person: I started crying. At that time I was severely burned out in my career and all I could see in the failure of that remote control was my own breakdown. The duct tape that held together the battery compartment, missing buttons, and dog chew marks felt just like the shredding of my confidence by the inconsistency of patients that hadn't "read the book," financial stress, and 60-hour workweeks. Truthfully, I had it all wrong. I was not the remote control, I was the batteries. The remote was the hospital I worked for—and both had failed me.

Our profession will likely always be plagued by the characteristics that most predictably lead to burnout: perfectionism, competitiveness, people-pleasing, and empathy. While the anti-burnout training that has become widespread on subjects such as personal resilience, boundaries, and wellbeing will always have a place, it will never be enough if we continue to plug our people—our energy, our batteries—into a damaged system: our universal remote. Our challenge is to continue to promote ongoing personal resilience training while also elevating the need for *organizational* resistance, a shift that has already started for the human primate veterinarians known as physicians. Just like rechargeable batteries never quite regain their full strength, we never fully recover from burnout. That's why prevention is the most powerful solution. Veterinary clinics, schools, corporations, and departments have to bear the burden of correcting, updating, and fixing how we work. In fact, research has shown that our environment has more impact on the risk of burnout than our personal actions.

In the same way that slapping duct tape on that remote had failed me, we can't update our workplaces with simple fixes and expect big results. We need to rethink our work in big ways to make it work again! We need brave, well-trained, and flexible leaders who turn threats into challenges, find ways to improve efficiency, and see mistakes as opportunities to grow rather than errors. We need to boldly ask ourselves "why" we do the things we do at every turn and be open to creative solutions and expertise from other professionals—especially mental health professionals. Let's ask ourselves: Why is a 40-hour workweek our standard? Why can't we share on-call with another clinic? Why are we open on weekends? I don't have all the answers, but the simple act of questioning what has become standard may bring about positive change.

I threw out that remote and got a new one. One that, in fact, wasn't as fancy but suited my needs better. I also got a new job, one that wasn't as fancy either but fit my priorities better. To this day, I am still searching for a dog-bite-resistant remote, but I'm not giving up! **TVP**

Ben Kirchner

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This column is titled "The Secret Life Vets" so I can talk about the secrets that really should be considered well-known truths. These are the not-so-secret secrets that can help change our thinking and our profession for the better.