

## Chapter 1

# How I Got Interested in Mental Health Issues

Since my early thirties (around 1982) I've been interested in wellness, stress, resiliency, burn-out, and trauma, but these subjects hit home hard in 2014.

My only sibling, my sister Susan, was at Moffitt Cancer Center with pancreatic cancer. Dr. Pamela Hodul did a Whipple procedure on September 12. It lasted thirteen and a half hours. Now, my sister was not a good candidate for the Whipple procedure and understood the risk. My sister had the procedure because she believed it was her only chance.

At the time, my sister was the caregiver for my parents. I lived far away and traveled a lot, so she took on most of the responsibility. My sister never had children. She was totally devoted to mother and father. My mother said to her, "Please don't leave me." She took that to heart and decided to have the risky operation.

And as it turned out, Susan lived three months, passing away on December 1, 2014. During that time, she received excellent care from a team of remarkable physicians. Dr. Hodul was the one we got to know best. We saw her cry for my sister more than once. Like most physicians, she cares deeply about her patients.

In addition to the emotional turmoil caused by losing patients you've desperately tried to save, Dr. Hodul kept a brutal schedule. She worked six days a week, coming in at 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. and staying well into the night. And the surgeries themselves were grueling. In fact, Dr. Hodul was so physically exhausted and emotionally depleted after Susan's thirteen-and-a-half-hour surgery

that she cried. While I felt I understood the pressures healthcare providers deal with, I learned much watching the caregivers of my sister.

During this time, I received a phone call from George Ford, MD, a physician in San Antonio, Texas. He shared with me that he'd followed my work. He felt that I had some impact in health-care, and that it would be helpful if I would shine a light on the issue of physician burnout and the high suicide rates. He and I started collaborating, and in 2015 we released a book called *Healing Physician Burnout: Diagnosing, Preventing, and Treating*. This book is more relevant today than ever.

I've been able to continue my work in this area of well-being, stress, burnout, and trauma education. Besides having gotten to work with Dr. Ford, I'm on the board of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, a well-known national behavioral health organization, particularly noted for their work in the area of addiction.

I serve on the board of TriHealth in Cincinnati, Ohio. This helps me see the impact of COVID-19 from a board perspective. Mark Clement, TriHealth's president and CEO, sends a weekly report to the board that updates us on exactly what's going on with the organization. I also serve on a board called Bethesda, Inc. which provides funding for many great healthcare initiatives in the Cincinnati area.

Healthcare education is an area that's long been close to my heart. I served on the board of AUPHA (the Association of University Programs in Health Administration) for many years. More recently, I've joined the board of CAHME (the Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education). Both of these experiences have given me a window to the tremendous impact stress and change have on students and faculty—particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which we'll discuss later.

I was lucky enough to meet Mark Goulston, a physician whose focus is on trauma and suicide prevention, years ago when he asked me to be on his podcast to talk about burnout, as well as Diana Hendel, a pharmacist who was the CEO of Long Beach Medical Center when they had a traumatic experience involving an employee who shot two supervisors. Mark and Diana were nice enough to ask me to write the foreword for their book that came out in 2020 titled *Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD*.

Now for a personal note: I am also interested in wellness issues because of my own experiences. I've struggled with my own mental health, including alcoholism and depression. In my thirties, I hit an emotional wall and started therapy. (For me, therapy has not been a "one and done" event; over the last 39 years I have benefited from therapy on numerous occasions.) At the time, the therapist pointed out to me that when she gave me positive feedback, I rejected it by my words and body language. I turned away. Yet when she gave me more constructive or less than positive

feedback, I accepted it. She concluded that one of the reasons I felt so depressed was that I filter out the positive and let in only the negative.

I've observed that many of us in healthcare do this. As a group, we are perfectionists, we are hard on ourselves, and, in our quest to care for others, we often don't take the time to care for ourselves. This reality, especially in light of the incredibly difficult year and half we've just been through, has created a sense of urgency for me.

All of these things came together for me and deepened my interest in burnout, stress, trauma, and well-being. I started searching for tools and techniques to help assess these problems on both individual and organizational levels. (Treatment plans designed to deal with stress will positively impact trauma; however, these plans probably won't reach people in trauma to the degree necessary.) I also started looking for ways to assist organizations and leaders in dealing with mental health stresses and remove the stigma around mental health.

Now, it has all culminated in the creation of this book. My hope is that *The Well-Being Handbook* will be a guide to assist organizations in creating a safer environment to have conversations regarding stress and trauma. My hope is that it will provide a resource each organization can personalize for their specific situation.

We all have the opportunity to help the workforce in the area of well-being, stress, and trauma.