

Chapter 3

How Did We Get So Depleted?

Most people enter healthcare with a full emotional bank account. They start out engaged and inspired, with a deep desire to be helpful and useful, and they can't wait to get started. Just go to a nurse's pinning ceremony and see how excited they are. Watch a doctor get their white lab coat in medical school. Notice their excitement when they're accepted into a residency.

Non-clinical people are just as excited to get a job in healthcare. Hospitals and healthcare practices tend to have great reputations in the community, the job likely has a good benefit plan, and they're feeling really good about being part of the healthcare profession.

The challenge is that while people start out full of passion, there tend to be a lot of more natural withdrawals from the emotional bank account, many of which we have no control over.

In healthcare we experience challenging things on a daily basis. Consider what it's like for a clinician caring for a seriously ill or injured person. At times, despite their best efforts, they just can't save that patient. While they do heroic work every day, doctors and staff are human. The loss of a patient is a huge withdrawal from the emotional bank account.

In addition, work/life balance provides unique situations for healthcare workers. For example, you're an ICU nurse. You get a call from the school saying your daughter got a bump on the head and is probably okay, but you will want to come get her. When you do front line care, especially when you're caring for very sick patients, it's just not always possible to break away like it is for people in other jobs.

Leaders have additional struggles. There are so many things that cannot be controlled, like payments. With the stroke of a pen, reimbursement can change drastically. And when this happens, cuts, changes, and delays are often inevitable. A reduction in force may need to take place. Needed improvements may be postponed. These are messages that are hard for leaders to deliver and hard for staff members to hear. They can be huge emotional bank account withdrawals.

Everything I've just described is what happens in normal times. But what happens when a global pandemic takes place? Stress, anxiety, and trauma escalate tremendously.

As they worked on the frontlines of COVID-19, some healthcare professionals contracted the virus. Those who were fortunate enough to escape the virus worked every day in fear of being infected. Supply chains struggled in the pandemic; there were PPE shortages. Work hours were long and exhausting, and the trauma that came from seeing so much suffering and death was immeasurable.

Then, lockdown thrust us into unknown territory. As with everyone else, the pandemic didn't just affect work, but home life, too. Healthcare workers had to deal with challenges like virtual schooling, the job loss of family members, and a sense of isolation. Balancing work and home life was particularly hard for them. While people in other industries could work from home, healthcare professionals didn't have that option. (This made managing kids who were being homeschooled even more difficult.) On top of all this was the constant worry of bringing COVID-19 home to their families.

It may have seemed like healthcare leaders did not realize how much stress and trauma were being experienced by clinicians and staff. At times, the need to have all boots on the ground made it hard to provide resources. There were so many unknowns. No one realized how long the pandemic would go on. (Remember "two weeks to flatten the curve"?)

Also, at the beginning of the pandemic, the world really celebrated "healthcare heroes." While still feeling appreciated, the situation has led to exhaustion and self-doubt for some in looking at staying in healthcare.

At the time all of this was going on, we've had to deal with political, cultural, and social upheaval. It's been an incredibly challenging year in almost every possible way. And on top of these challenges is a pervasive sense of grief that life has changed forever. Even as we navigate this underlying sense of loss, we must also grapple with fears of new variants that are emerging in some parts of the country.