

The Patient Experience Post

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How to Tell When Your Healthcare Heroes are NOT Okay

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Your culture determines many things, but today especially, it is a determinant of how well your organization will fare through the pandemic. What you say and what you do always matter, but when people are fatigued and somewhat fragile, a leader's actions are even more crucial in maintaining a positive culture and one of compassion.

Over the past six months we've all been put to the test as we deal with new and demanding pressures imposed by COVID-19. Healthcare workers have been tested in their professional as well as personal lives.

There has been well-deserved attention on our healthcare heroes honoring the service and sacrifice, but even superheroes need a break, a shoulder and even a good cry.

Healthcare jobs are stressful on the best of days, but when you add the fear of contracting COVID with the additional burdens placed on working families, many of our brightest and best team members are stretched to the max.

I recently had a discussion with a nurse manager whom I will call, Ellie. Ellie had been working 12 plus hours per day for months before leaving her position for good. "I was spent," she told me. "I had to create an adult ICU in my children's hospital in a matter of days. My team was amazing and rose to the challenge. We got it done and went on to treat dozens of critical care patients for weeks. We did a fabulous job and had great outcomes with zero turnover in staff. But the truth is, I was burned out – mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted. I have four young children at home and just hit a point when I couldn't do it anymore."

This nurse leader's story isn't that unusual. In crisis, healthcare workers are trained to step up, stay calm, and deal with the issue at hand. Ellie did just that, getting great results and earning kudos from the executive team. But at a cost.

Day after day, leaders make rounds on their units and throughout their organizations. Those rounds provide an ideal opportunity to observe team members and identify subtle changes in behavior that indicate fatigue and even burnout. That is, only if the rounder engages in meaningful conversation instead of the proverbial drive-by consisting of, "How are you?" A question which will almost always receive the perfunctory response, "Fine."

Stop asking, "How are you?" or "How's it going?" You know you won't get into real feelings. Instead, ask the employee if she/he can take a few minutes to sit down with you. Use open-ended conversation starters such as, "Tell me about your day so far." Then listen with your ears AND your eyes. Non-verbal cues speak louder than the words.

According to an article in Nursing.org, there are specific signs and symptoms you should observe for including:

- Irritability
- Frequently calling in sick
- Intolerance to change
- Exhaustion
- “Checked out” mentality

When you observe these in your team members, share your concerns. Let him/her know what you are seeing and that you are concerned for their well-being.

Leaders like Ellie often put on a brave face for the good of their staffs. While the leader may be checking in and taking good care of her team; who is checking in on the leader? It is vital that leaders look out for one another as well and practice the same self-care they would recommend for their staff nurses.

Society loves our superheroes, but you'll rarely see headlines celebrating the caregivers who take breaks, practice self-care and set limits. Remember that burnout is caused by many stressors beyond the work-related ones. We're more isolated than ever before and restricted from many of the social activities we enjoy ranging from church services to sports, family gatherings and shopping. Many times, employees are caregivers for children and aging parents. Virtual learning for school-age children has created childcare and tutoring responsibilities that weren't issues a year ago. The demands can build up over time pushing them to the tipping point.

Leaders can help by:

- Practicing self-care and encourage it with your staff
- Being observant for symptoms of burnout
- Offering EAP services
- Knowing what your company's EAP has to offer – While often associated with mental health services, some plans may offer assistance with child care and elder care

Fostering a culture of compassion takes a commitment to seeing problem, addressing them and finding solutions. Let's care for the caregivers.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.