

Utilizing Active Listening in Tackling Burnout in the American Healthcare System

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Abstract

Burnout is a significant issue in the American healthcare system, and it can lead to decreased productivity, increased medical errors, and reduced job satisfaction among healthcare professionals. Utilizing active listening is one way to address burnout in healthcare workers.

Active listening involves paying attention to the speaker, demonstrating understanding and empathy, and responding appropriately.

By practicing active listening, healthcare professionals can better understand their colleagues' challenges and concerns, which can help create a more supportive work environment. This, in turn, can reduce burnout and improve the overall well-being of healthcare workers.

Keywords: burnout; active listening; American Healthcare System; healthcare workers; quiet quitting.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has, among many expositions, exposed the continuing stress and pressure healthcare workers undergo as they struggle to provide care to patients and their families.

Burnout was first described in 1974 by the clinical psychologist Herbert Freudenberg, who often volunteered at a free clinic in the then drug-ridden East Village of New York City. Over time, Freudenberg observed emotional depletion and accompanying psychosomatic symptoms among the clinic's volunteer staff [1]. He called the phenomenon - burnout borrowing the term from drug-addict slang. Freudenberg defined burnout as exhaustion leading to the enormous cost of energy, strength, or resources [2].

The burden of burnout in the healthcare system in America is a significant and growing problem. Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress. Burnout is evident in cynicism, detachment, and decreased satisfaction in work. Burnout affects the quality of care to patients as it is a big concern for healthcare organizations.

Even in the post-COVID era, healthcare workers still face burnout leading to many quiet quitting, a term that has come to apportion the blame on the workers alone! Nothing seems to have changed much despite the efforts to mitigate this problem. Yet, addressing burnout among healthcare providers is critical to improving the health and well-being of providers and patients. In this paper, we contend that

efforts to resolve the issue can only occur in an environment where employers and employees can communicate to understand each other through active listening.

Review of Literature

Healthcare organizations, employers, and government agencies; have not been silent about putting a check to incessant burnout.

There has been the implementation of work-life balance policies. Some healthcare organizations have implemented flexible work schedules, paid time off, and telecommuting options to reduce work stress and improve work-life balance [3,4].

Also, some Healthcare organizations have drawn policies to promote self-care among healthcare workers by providing access to mental health resources, such as counseling and support groups. Again, the use of technology in the healthcare sector to automate routine tasks and reduce workloads [2]. The expectation was to help free up time for healthcare workers to focus on more complex and rewarding tasks [2].

Yet, there still exists relative evidence on how to tackle the problem of burnout. Given that, government agencies and healthcare organizations are yet to address systemic issues such as inadequate staffing, poor working conditions, and lack of resources; beyond having them as policies, which contribute to burnout. Growing research seems to point to individual and organizational collaboration as the way out [2]. The scenario indicates a question of leadership [5]. It will take leadership to inspire collaboration, communicate motivation, and persuade the stakeholders (internal physicians, nurses, and external patients and sponsors) that they are valued and appreciated [6]. Such cannot happen if government agencies and healthcare organizations have not actively listened to each other.

The Burden of burnouts in the American HealthCare System

At the organizational level, healthcare providers face increased stress, long hours, and high levels of responsibility, leading to a high incidence of burnout. With increasing pressure to perform their duties in a fast-paced

and demanding environment, with many long hours and high workloads leading to exhaustion, stress, and burnout, physicians and nurses have had to be battling with decreased job satisfaction, decrease job performance, and higher rates of absenteeism and turnover [3,7-9].

The prevalence rate of burnout among healthcare providers in the United States is such that among physicians, there is a burnout rate of 51%, and those greatly affected are those on the frontline of care [2]. Among nurses, the rate of burnout staggers at a roaring rate of 43%, while for residents and medical students, the rate is tagged at 69% [10,11]. There is little doubt that this makes it less likely for these providers to provide high-quality care and be prone to making errors [12]. It equally goes a long way to lead to a decrease in the patient-provider relationship and patient satisfaction. Among the medical students and residents are growing rates of burnout leading to dishonest clinical acts, weak altruism, and high alcohol and substance abuse [13,14]. Yet, the burden of burnout is not limited to the well-being of healthcare providers but is also detrimental to patient care.

Patients are also negatively impacted by burnout among healthcare providers. Burned-out providers are less likely to provide high-quality care and are more prone to medical errors. They may also have less time and energy to devote to individual patients, leading to a decreased patient-provider relationship and a decrease in patient satisfaction [15]. Among nurses, greater levels of burnout have resulted in higher rates of patient mortality and the spreading of hospital-transmitted infections [16,17].

Utilizing Active Listening, a recommendation

Next to physical survival, the greatest need of the human being is psychological survival: to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated. Hence, the importance of active listening in genuine communication. Active listening means listening to understand [18].

Active or reflective listening originated from the American psychologist Carl Roger for personal counseling use [19]. Consisting of a genuine desire to understand the other and communicate what was understood active listening; involves focusing on receiving the deep communication of another

human soul. It is about making deposits in emotional bank accounts and putting oneself in the shoes of others to verbalize their needs and concerns. Active listening invites us to understand first before judging. Because when we listen to others with judgment, we suspend understanding them.

Active listening is a vital communication skill that involves fully engaging with and understanding the speaker's message. It is characterized by a conscious effort to comprehend and respond effectively to verbal and nonverbal cues, demonstrating genuine interest and empathy towards the speaker. According to Auerbach and Routledge [20], active listening encompasses various essential components, such as maintaining eye contact, nodding, or providing appropriate facial expressions, and using verbal cues, such as paraphrasing or summarizing the speaker's words [20].

In active listening, we forego our autobiographical responses (evaluating, probing, advising, interpreting) for the four stages of active and reflective listening; suspending judgment; concentrating on emotion and content; following in the conversation, and reflecting on what was understood [21,19]. This lack may have been the failure of communication within the healthcare system that has kept those policies starved of implementation.

Active listening also involves avoiding distractions and focusing one's attention solely on the speaker. As noted by Brown and [22], this requires setting aside personal biases, preconceptions, and distractions to create a supportive and inclusive environment for effective communication. Active listening entails actively seeking to understand the speaker's perspective, emotions, and underlying motivations by carefully observing their body language, tone of voice, and overall demeanor. By doing so, the listener can accurately interpret the message and respond appropriately, demonstrating their commitment to understanding and validating the speaker's experiences.

Utilizing active listening skills, leaders in addressing burnout among their team members would understand the root cause of the issue and provide support. Healthcare management listening actively to the internal stakeholders will strengthen the communication wheel and show the

corporate intention to provide solutions to the employees' plight and encourage shared identity and loyalty, which are ingredients of the sequence of success for any organization [23]. These can include creating an open and supportive work environment, promoting work life balance, providing resources for stress management, and seeking feedback from team members. Active listening skills such as paying attention, demonstrating empathy, and asking questions can help leaders to understand the employees' perspectives and find solutions to prevent burnout. By doing so, leaders can create a positive workplace culture, improve employee morale, and retain talent.

Active listening provides the opportunity to understand the viewpoint of the other. As such, a leader with excellent listening skills can identify and address broader systemic issues within the organization that may contribute to burnout and work to implement changes that create a more sustainable work environment for everyone. When the healthcare management listens actively to the internal stakeholders to understand their viewpoints, there will be opportunities to understand better the why, how, and what of perpetuating burnout despite the efforts made so far. For the management, it would require answering why, which is an act of empathy and adds a layer of persuasion [24]; a particular policy needs to be implemented instead of the other.

Active listening would require healthcare management to check how supportive their communication of the policies made to address the problem of burnout has been. As the internal stakeholders are the first victims of the problem, genuinely listening to their experience of its impact on their lives, living, and work is essential. They will provide the management answers as to how their assessment of the incidence of burnout is objective; and how honest, integrative, positive, and focused on the problem their policies have been. These provide the essentials of supportive communication to tackling burnout in the healthcare system [25].

The leaders' role in addressing burnout among team members is crucial, and active listening is one of the skills that can help. Actively listening to the internal stakeholders

provides an opening for the management to help them by communicating policies to tackle their problems, knowing their feelings about the policies implemented, and knowing how to improve. Active listening provides the awareness to check how physicians and nurses are experiencing the policies implemented to tackle burnout.

Furthermore, the burnout experience of the internal stakeholders affects the external stakeholders (patients and the care provided to them and sponsors). Healthcare management empathizing with the burnout of the internal stakeholders is essential to reducing medical errors, the transmission of hospital-acquired infection because of inadequate attention to protocol, and creating an empathetic culture, a culture where; patients feel valued and treated by relaxed and compassionate healthcare providers. With less-pressured healthcare providers, patient satisfaction, treatment compliance; and clinical outcomes will improve [26].

However, to effectively implement active listening in a healthcare setting, it is essential to provide providers and management with training and support to help them develop and refine their listening skills. Such will foster a culture of open communication and collaboration.

Utilizing active listening: expected outcomes

Active listening is a fundamental skill that goes beyond simply hearing words. It involves active engagement, empathy, and the conscious effort to understand the speaker's message. Through attentive observation and genuine interest, active listeners create an environment of trust and openness, fostering effective communication and meaningful connections. By incorporating active listening into interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions, organizations and individuals can enhance their relationships, promote understanding, and cultivate a culture of respect and empathy.

By actively listening to their concerns, healthcare organizations can address the root causes of burnout among healthcare providers. Such supportive communication will usher in collaborative perspectives on excessive workload, lack of support, and poor work-life balance. Thus, ensuring

the proper awareness of what policies to tackle burnout, how they are doing, and what needs to change [21].

Active listening in reducing burnout among healthcare professionals will help to foster better communication and understanding between patients and providers. By actively listening to patients and their concerns, unpressured healthcare professionals can build trust, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve patient outcomes. Moreover, active listening will help healthcare providers to reflect on their emotions and experiences, which can help prevent burnout [27].

With active listening incorporated among healthcare workers and their supervisors; views and concerns will be expressed without fear or favor and understood; considered, and effectively managed. Quiet quitting would no longer be the fault of the employees alone; there shall no longer be any reason to assume that everyone gets it or is prepared to get on with it as far as burnout is concerned. Engagingly listening between healthcare management and the internal stakeholders would improve the understanding of management as not homogenous, so understanding the various and varying aspects of the problem of burnout is a key to effectively tackling it.

By actively engaging and attentively listening to patients, unpressured healthcare providers will create a more humanistic and empathetic experience for patients improving care outcomes and ensuring treatment compliance. Thus, make caregiving service compassionate!

Limitations

This study has some limitations that are essential to consider in interpreting its findings.

- The study focuses on the American healthcare sector, so it is not clear whether the findings would be generalizable to other industries.
- The study does not consider the specific challenges of implementing active listening in a busy and demanding healthcare environment.

Overall, the study provides a valuable starting point for research on the potential benefits of active listening in

reducing burnout. However, more research is needed to consider the benefits of active listening in other sectors and the specific challenges to implementing it in the healthcare setting.

Conclusion

Burnout in the American healthcare system has become one major challenge to efficient care provision and quality. It is a real problem demanding real solutions.

Active listening is a powerful tool that can be used to reduce burnout in the American healthcare system. By listening to healthcare professionals with empathy and understanding, we can help them to feel supported and valued. This can lead to a decrease in stress, an increase in job satisfaction, and a better overall work environment.

There are a number of ways to implement active listening in the healthcare setting. Healthcare organizations can make it a priority to train their staff on active listening skills and to provide opportunities for staff to practice these skills. Healthcare organizations can also create a supportive environment where staff feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.

Active listening is not a cure-all for burnout, but it can be a valuable tool in reducing its prevalence. By listening to healthcare professionals with care and attention, we can help them to feel better about their work and to be more resilient in the face of stress.

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, active listening can also help to improve communication, build trust, and resolve conflict. This can lead to a more positive and productive work environment for everyone involved.

If you are a healthcare professional who is struggling with burnout, active listening training may be a helpful way to improve your well-being. There are many resources available to help you learn active listening skills, and you may also want to consider seeking professional help.

By working together, we can create a healthcare system where burnout is no longer the norm. Active listening is a powerful tool that can help us to achieve this goal. It requires humility. It requires courage to be engaged!

Declarations

- All research data used for this work are shared in the work for verification.
- Kizito Uzoma Ndugbu, conceived, carried out the research, and approved it for publication.
- There is no funding received for the research.
- There is no conflict of interest.

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