

## Connie Zhong

Brody School of Medicine

---

### *When the Doctor is Ill*

Burnout. A simple word with different faces and stages, and even more complex causes. A challenging undergraduate and medical school experience, relationship problems, continued sleep deprivation, learned failure, predisposition to stress. These and other common factors have led to a perhaps regrettably familiar combination of symptoms – exhaustion, inability to focus, shortened temper, and problems with memory and concentration. Though I hadn't ventured far down my medical career pathway, I had started to question and doubt my decisions. Why was I putting myself through all of this? Did I make the right choice?

In school, we learned about the biopsychosocial model of healthcare. Treating a patient is not only about treating the biological manifestation of the disease. It also involves learning about psychological and social factors that may be contributing to the

progression of the disease as well as the efficiency of treatment. Only later did I realize that this model applies not only to patients, but also to physicians and future physicians. I experienced biological symptoms like headaches that I tried to treat with medicine. However, these symptoms had additional, varied social and psychological causes – test anxiety, low self-confidence due to mediocre grades, pressure from increasing student debt, and feelings of social isolation. The realization that I was burnt out hit later than it should have. It explained so much, easing feelings of guilt, confusion, and inadequacy.

The realization did far more than just ease negative feelings. It opened my eyes, it made me reflect more, and it gave me a slow but steady stream of energy in the form of treatment and self-care. I had chosen to go into medicine because I had seen how disease was complicated and difficult, affecting

many different parts of a patient's life as well as the lives of friends and family. Burnout and other challenges physicians face are also complicated and difficult, but they can be dealt with and learned from.

*"My goal is to reduce stigma by increasing attention to and awareness of the issue [of burnout]."*

In my case, I may have had too much of a type A personality – constantly stressing and speeding around, trying to accomplish anything and everything. I didn't realize the detrimental effects, though. Working too hard (and not smart enough) had caused my brain to almost completely shut down. So I learned. I learned the importance of self-care, to take more breaks, to look at the bigger picture, to get enough sleep, to seek out the support of others. I have yet to fully implement all of these changes, but I am excited. I am excited about reaching more of my potential, striving towards fulfilling the goals that had motivated me to choose medicine in the first place, and being able to treat future patients to the best of my ability.

My old friend led me to this realization. I am now using my own personal experiences and reflections to help other friends. I have heard stories of people in medical school not having time to buy groceries, only eating bread or an energy bar for meals; I have heard of people running on 3 hours of sleep for multiple days in a row; I have heard of people joking about having to constrain their mental breakdown to the time and space of a shower. Thus, I have come to view my peers as some of my first patients. Observing their symptoms from the history they give me, I am able to make a diagnosis and advise them on their condition and possible treatment options. As with future patients, it may take some effort to convince them and help them adhere to treatment. A little persistence may go a long way.

In my eyes, burnout is intriguingly similar to disease in multiple ways. Burnout, both the symptoms of it and treatment options, has stigma associated with it. My goal is to reduce stigma by increasing attention to and awareness of the issue. Furthermore, I want to increase detection of burnout, as early as possible, and treat it methodically. Perhaps we could even one day come up with a "vaccine" and eradicate this "disease". For now, it is a work in progress, but I can assure myself that I have, indeed, made the right choice.