

Q&A Summary
Finding Your Joy in Practice Again

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Moderator: Lewis G. Sandy, MD, FACP, Executive Vice President, Clinical Advancement, UnitedHealth Group, Minnetonka, MN

Panelists: Charlee Alexander, Director, Action Collaborative on Clinician Well-Being and Resilience, National Academy of Medicine, Washington, DC; and Jacquelyn B. Fletcher, CEO, Heartwood Healing, LLC, Minneapolis, MN

Available On-Demand:

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1. Have there been any studies regarding mind wandering at an individual level? That is, we all know certain people dwell on the past, whereas others are more positive.

Absolutely. There have been thousands of studies done, since mind wandering is part of our psychological makeup. It's also the main focus of mindfulness training, since our thoughts so often cause or help to exacerbate our unhappiness, anxiety, fear, anger or distress. Below are a few resources I would suggest if you want to read more about mind wandering and how to influence it. If you're interested in doing a deep dive into the work around mind wandering, you can also contact us for a robust suggested reading list of both books and studies at hello@heartwoodhealing.com.

This book has a great summary of much of the science coming out of Harvard: *Stumbling on Happiness*, by Dan Gilbert. Vintage Books, 2006.

Full Catastrophe Living, by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Bantam Books, 2013. This book includes a wide body of research on mindfulness used specifically for helping manage thoughts that contribute to stress.

The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want, by Sonja Lyubomirsky. Penguin Books, 2008.

"The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being," by Kirk Warren Brown and Richard M. Ryan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 4 (2003): 822–848.

Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive, by Barbara Fredrickson. Crown Publishers, 2009.

The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being, by Daniel J. Siegel. Norton, 2007.

Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change and Thrive in Work and Life, by Susan David. Penguin Life, 2016.

Self-Compassion: The Power of Being Kind to Yourself, by Kristin Neff. William Morrow, 2015.

2. Mindfulness is difficult for me; any suggestions? How often would you take time to do mindfulness throughout your work week?

This is a great question! Mindfulness is difficult for many people. And the truth is, it's a practice that requires effort. I suggest doing a formal practice three times a week. You can do this by going to a class, watching a video or listening to a podcast or app early in the morning or right

before bed. The Heartwood Treehouse podcast is free and available on iTunes or HeartwoodHealing.com/podcast. I also suggest working small mindfulness moments into your entire day all week long. You can help yourself become present in the moment by tying reminders to triggers that happen already. Here are a few experiments to try:

- Before stepping through the door to a meeting or a patient room, take three deep breaths. Just bring your awareness to where you are. Notice what's around you. Ask yourself how you feel in that moment.
- Every time you eat a meal, use your five senses to pay attention to what you're eating. I've seen so many people shovel down food between meetings with a zombie-like look on their faces because they're not focused on the food at all. Instead, put your fork down between each bite and really notice the food itself and the act of eating it.
- Set your alarm so you get up from your desk every twenty minutes. Engage all of your senses in the present moment as you stretch your body. The interruptions will be annoying at first, but your body and mind will benefit enormously.
- I learned this one in a meditation class this week, and I love it for its simplicity. It also gives your mind something to do with your thoughts. In any moment when you can become conscious of the present, think to yourself, "Just" on the inhale and "This" on the exhale, to remind you that whatever you're doing in the moment is all you're doing.

3. What's your overall opinion on soothing spa music in the workplace—does it really work?

I have mixed feelings about this. Research has shown that music has tremendous healing benefits for people—if they like the kind of music playing. If they don't like it, it can backfire. Spa music tends to be pretty low-key, and it can create such a beautiful environment with sound, so for the most part it tends to work well. It can also help people feel more comfortable if they're waiting in silence with strangers.

Other types of music are more polarizing. And music is one of the biggest triggers for long-term memories. If someone had a bad experience at the opera when they were a kid, it's highly likely they'll remember it every single time they hear opera music.

Spa music is typically a great choice since it's designed to sink into the background.

4. How do we respectfully discuss burnout with our bosses? Many workers are disengaged by poor relationships with managers or not allowed time to take mindful moments.

This is another wonderful question! I hear from many people in health care that their bosses don't believe burnout is a problem in their organization, but research is showing it's a problem in every organization. First of all, I would pull the research Charlee Alexander from the National Academy of Medicine shared with all of you and give that to your boss as a way to open a conversation. There's lots of research that shows how much better—and faster—our brains work when we take regular quick breaks to recharge ourselves.

Nobody likes to have challenging conversations, but if we want change to occur, then we must be brave enough to speak up. To do this, I would use conversation techniques that don't trigger defensiveness. Here are some of my favorites:

- Use "I" language that helps to keep the other person from feeling defensive. So instead of saying, "The way you run this department stresses me out," you would keep the focus on your own feelings: "I feel a lot of stress, and I would love to find a way to make it better for all of us."

- Try using repair attempts regularly. This is when you insert something into a tough conversation that prevents people from flooding with stress hormones. You can give someone a compliment, or say something like, “I understand your perspective, too.” This helps keep the amygdala from firing with stress or fear and the executive functioning of everyone’s brains online—which means it will help keep the conversation from derailing into emotional reactions.
- Experiment with shoulder-to-shoulder relating. If you or your boss find talking about challenging or vulnerable things difficult, try talking when you don’t have to look each other in the eye. A walk is a great place to talk about tough issues.

Here’s an example of a script I might use:

“Hi Boss, can I speak with you? I’d like to talk with you about a concern I have. I was recently on a webcast and a woman from the National Academy of Medicine shared all the latest research on how health care organizations across the country are focusing on the problem of burnout because it’s turned into a crisis in our country.

“I have to be honest, I’m feeling close to burnout some days myself. Have you ever struggled with stress?

“I love what I do. And I want to make sure I’m serving this team (my job, our patients, our clients) as fully as possible. I’d love to share some of the research with you. Would you be open to seeing it?

“The researchers talked about a lot of things we can do to help reduce stress and avoid burnout.

“Would you be open to hearing about some of the strategies?”

Or

“I’d like to try some of the strategies and see how they impact my performance.”

Or

“I’d like to put together a resource sheet for our team/department to help direct people to the resources we have here.”

Or

“I’d like to experiment with building some breaks into my day to help me reduce my stress hormones and increase my resilience. Do you have any suggestions? Are the ways we could do this experiment with our whole team to see what impact it has? It could really help us stand out as an innovative and forward-thinking group within our company.”

5. How did you get into the mindfulness field, and how could one pursue a career in this field? How did you master yourself so that you could keep a commitment to mindfulness and stick with it?

I got into the mindfulness field out of desperation because I needed it myself. And I’ve stayed in it because I know it works and I feel better when I stick with it. I’ve also seen it transform the lives of my clients. My introduction to mindfulness was in my twenties after I ripped a psoas muscle while exercising. The physical therapist I worked with taught yoga classes for injured people. I began taking his class, and as I strengthened my back and core, I discovered mindfulness and meditation.

In each class, I was fed these beautiful words: “Listen to your body. What are you feeling? What sensations do you notice? What’s going on in your thoughts?” I realized that my thoughts were

terrible! I often thought judgmental and downright mean thoughts about myself. It was a wake-up call. I kept doing yoga and started meditating because it made me feel so much better. It helped me learn to regulate my emotions; change my habits; and celebrate my body, mind and spirit.

There were times over the years that I fell out of the practice. Each time, when the stress of life began to build, I found myself running back to meditation and mindfulness as a way to navigate my way through with the most presence possible.

To pursue a career in mindfulness involves two steps. 1) Follow your curiosity. Study mindfulness and meditation and notice the types that you're drawn to practice. There are many styles, and some will resonate with you and some won't. 2) Find populations that need help and offer to serve them. Mindfulness classes and centers are blossoming all over the country—and are in need of instructors. I also use mindfulness regularly in the coaching I do with clients and the training I do with organizations.

6. When we see burnout in a colleague, what's the best way to help without causing the person to feel guilty or more overwhelmed?

The best way to help is to reach out to the person with genuine care and compassion, just as you would a patient. We all want to be seen and valued. So I would say something like this:

"I've been learning about stress and burnout lately, and I know we've got a stressful job. I've been thinking about you because I'm concerned. You seem pretty stressed out and overwhelmed these days. Can we talk for a minute?"

Or

"Can I help?"

If the person doesn't want to talk, you can try to encourage them to open up by saying something like, "I've felt a lot of stress myself, and it helps if you can talk to someone about it. I know it can be easy to feel like you're the only one feeling it, but it's really common."

You could then show them the symptoms and tools for burnout available in the American Medical Association Steps Forward Program: <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward>.

You could also share this: There are many coaches and therapists who are experienced at working with burned-out clinicians who can really help. The problem is, few people seek help, because seeking help is stigmatized. We're taught how to take care of our bodies. We're taught how to do the things we need to do in our profession. Few of us are taught the preventative strategies that can help us with our emotional and mental health. All humans go through stressful times, and if you don't learn the techniques that can help you navigate stress with resilience, it can be harder to bounce back than it needs to be.

7. Mindfulness is a great personal practice in all situations but a reactionary approach to those in health care that are responding to changes occurring in the industry. These changes in the industry address these sources are more of a working on the cause of the situation. How would you respond to this?

The stress and burnout infecting the health care industry (and others!) right now is a serious and complex issue. And it's one that has reached such a critical stage that people all across the country are working to address it from multiple perspectives.

Organizations need to address the things that are causing the most stress. You have no argument there from me. Health care leaders need to allocate time and dollars to identifying what changes can be made to better support clinicians.

There are some great recommendations for organizations coming from:

- American Medical Association: <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward>
- National Academy of Medicine: <https://nam.edu/initiatives/clinician-resilience-and-well-being/>
- Stanford Medicine WellMD Center: <https://wellmd.stanford.edu/center1.html>

And there will always be stress in our lives, which is why we also need to address it from the individual's perspective. Even if health care goes through a massive shift in the way care is delivered that eases the pressure, there will still be stress. I don't believe it's a reactionary response to bring mindfulness or other resilience-building or mental health practices into health care organizations. I believe it's forward-thinking and innovative. And it's about time.

If you have questions regarding this document or the content herein, please contact:
moreinfo@optumhealtheducation.com.