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Help for Today's Tense, Frustrated Doctors

Kevin Pho, MD; Douglas Farrago, MD

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Introduction

It's tough to be a doctor these days. Whether it's listening to the difficulties of our medical colleagues as they try to best care for their patients, or engaging other health professionals about the uncertainties surrounding health reform, we've noticed a tense, sometimes gloomy, atmosphere among physicians.

A recent survey from the *Annals of Internal Medicine* bears this out. More than a quarter of primary care doctors reported being "burnt out," in part due to worsening time pressures and a chaotic work pace, which were "strongly associated with low physician satisfaction."^[1]

An alarming number of physicians, unable to cope with the pressures of practicing everyday medicine, succumb to the stress. Consider that 300-400 doctors in the United States kill themselves every year, or roughly 1 per day. Male doctors have suicide rates 1.4 times that of the general population, while female doctors have twice the rate of depression and 2.3 times the suicide rate when compared with women who are not physicians.

Maybe it would help if we could all laugh a little more often. Really.

Although doctors are known as a pretty serious group, humor is one of the best ways to cope with the harsh realities that we face daily.

This concept isn't new. The phenomenon of using humor in difficult situations was first studied by the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. He introduced the term "gallows humor," which is based on the theory that joking relieves anxiety and laughter can transform unpleasant feelings into ones that are more positive.

Indeed, researchers have pointed to humor as a way for doctors to express a wide array of stressful emotions, including grief, disappointment, and anger, in ways that they find more palatable. A study from the *Annals of Emergency Medicine* looked at how emergency physicians managed stress and reported that the ability to find humor in everyday experiences was among the most successful strategies to prevent burnout.^[2]

Humor itself won't overcome the obstacles that doctors face today, such as an increasing bureaucratic burden or a worsening malpractice environment. But poking fun at some of these inane situations can perhaps alleviate some of that distress.

Patients also can benefit from some levity during their doctor's visit. We've heard from many patients who are growing increasingly dissatisfied after receiving medical care. They report little eye contact, decreased face-to-face time, and feeling depersonalized. These are all consequences of a medical system that promotes rushed physician encounters.

How to Help the Situation

As the doctor-patient relationship deteriorates, can a well-placed, appropriate joke help?

Yes. Sharing lighter moments can make appointments feel less hurried and have patients thinking, "Hey, this doctor

spent a few minutes to tell a joke, rather than rushing straight to the lab results or x-ray report." Sensitive topics can be broached more easily once a shared laugh breaks the proverbial ice.

Of course, common sense applies when trying to be funny in the exam room. Don't tell sexually or racially tinged jokes. When meeting a patient for the first time, get a sense of what's an acceptable boundary of communication.

Sometimes, when soliciting a social history, for example, patients themselves may tell a joke, indicating that they are open to humor on the doctor's part. Remember, though, that humor is never appropriate when delivering bad news. In such cases, patients want to know that their situation is being taken seriously.

Hippocrates suggested that doctors should use both wit and humor when interacting with patients, as "dourness is repulsive both to the healthy and to the sick." Patients in a hospital or at a clinic are usually anxious and sometimes overwhelmed while dealing with their illness.

Sharing a joke or a smile not only can lighten the mood of a tense situation, but also can better connect doctors with their patients as they laugh at something in common. The medical journal *The Oncologist* interviewed cancer doctors who poignantly noted that "the ability to laugh, for doctors to take a moment to detach themselves from medicine, ^[was] something that patients certainly appreciated."

With the uncertain prospects of health reform dominating the headlines -- and the debate often contentious -- it's a challenge to find anything amusing about healthcare today. Physicians, meanwhile, struggle to find ways to best practice medicine despite worsening regulatory impediments while fighting an uphill battle to rekindle the relationships they once had with their patients.

No matter how glum the situation appears to be, it's important for doctors to try to find a ray of humor. It can only help.

References

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Authors and Disclosures

Author(s)

Kevin Pho, MD

Internal medicine, Nashua Medical Group, Nashua, New Hampshire; blogs at KevinMD.com

Disclosure: Kevin Pho, MD, has disclosed no relevant financial relationships.

Douglas Farrago, MD

Family practice, Court Street Family Practice, Auburn, Maine; editor of the *Placebo Journal*

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