



Current Problems in Diagnostic Radiology

journal homepage: www.cpdjournal.com



Cultivating Meaningful Work in Healthcare: A Paradigm and Practice

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The socioeconomic dynamics of the current healthcare system can challenge physicians to remain engaged with meaningful work, which is problematic given its role in mitigating burnout. In *Man's Search For Meaning*, Victor Frankl proposes that meaningful work is a prerequisite for a meaningful life. This article provides a road map for radiologists by applying key guiding principles outlined by Frankl as they intersect with current evidence in the field of physician burnout.

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Mary's Case: A Path Toward Purpose

Mary was a high performing young academic radiologist. However she had become cynical regarding her ability to effect positive change for her patients, and felt a lack of meaning in her work in the context of increasing productivity demands. Mary felt called to make a difference in people's lives, however increasing radiologist isolation diminished her sense of personal accomplishment. During a period of PACS downtime, she joked about her increasing cynicism with a colleague, who acknowledged her sentiments and directed her to their institution's Resilience Office. Mary subsequently participated in a value clarification workshop, which reminded Mary of her core value of service. This, in turn, prompted her to recall how satisfying international aid work had been during medical school. With her core values in mind, Mary decided to devote her time to establishing a Rad-Aid International site at her institution, rather than committing to yet another incremental clinical research project. Although it required a substantial time commitment beyond routine working hours, Mary found herself leading a committee where she felt grateful to collaborate with like-minded individuals toward a common, value-oriented goal. Mary began to notice that her sense of purpose was slowly restored through this small but critical shift in the nature and scope of her work.

Introduction

Mary's situation is commonly encountered in professional medicine, as the socioeconomic dynamics of the current healthcare system can challenge physicians to remain engaged with meaningful work. Physician burnout can be defined as a syndrome that occurs in response to workplace stress and is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a diminished sense of accomplishment.¹ Inefficiency in the workplace has been cited as one factor contributing to burnout among radiologists.² Conversely, engaging in meaningful work has been offered as a protective strategy to mitigate burnout, and Shanefelt et al place meaningful work at the center of their driver dimensions model for physician

burnout and organizational change.³ This elevated position of the pursuit of meaningful work as central to physician engagement speaks to the fact that medicine has long been designated as a career to which one is called. A recent study has shown that those physicians with lesser degrees of burnout were statistically more likely to identify with medicine as a calling as defined by a sense committing one's life to personally meaningful work that serves a prosocial purpose.⁴ A critical connection between resilience and engagement on the one hand, and burnout on the other, is thought to lie in the ability to cultivate a sense of meaning in work. There may be no greater treatise on purpose and meaning than psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search For Meaning*.⁵ *Man's Search for Meaning* is Frankl's psychoeducational memoir of surviving a concentration camp and in part reflects his contributions to the field of logotherapy—a psychological construct that proposes that the human will to find meaning is of primary motivation for living. One of the prerequisites Frankl proposes as necessary for a meaningful life is the pursuit of meaningful work. The unique nature and degree of suffering permeating Frankl's memoir warrants recognition in that any discussion extrapolating this theoretical constructs to the modern workplace does imply a comparison in degree of circumstance or extremis. Rather, this work aspires to leverage the powerful lessons' Frankl shares, as he intended, toward cultivation of the common and individual good.

This article provides a road map for radiologists by applying key guiding principles outlined by Frankl as they intersect with current evidence in the field of physician burnout.

Definition of Meaningful Work Is Unique to the Individual

*"Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual. These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way."*⁵

The concept of meaningful work may be as ambiguous as it is unique. Therefore, defining meaning and contrasting meaning with happiness may provide a useful framework in the discussion surrounding physician resilience. Recent research has revealed several key

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differences between happiness and meaning and critical to this distinction is that meaningful experiences are not always positive or pleasant but include those experiences that may involve stress or challenge.⁶ As applied to work related efforts, not all work that brings one meaning will result in an immediate sense of happiness and conversely, not all stimuli/activities that create a sense of well-being will be perceived as meaningful. Furthermore, society and external standards of success do not necessarily inform a meaningful or happy life. Meaningful work may be best achieved by engaging in activities that draw upon ones unique talents and values, a practice that takes commitment and often sacrifice. Examples of personal values include constructs such as creativity and teamwork. Values are personally defined and often a product of personality, worldview, and life experience.

Evidence suggests that value-aligned work protects one from experiencing burnout with a recent study among academic physicians demonstrated that spending 20% of work related effort/1 day per week engaged in those activities (clinical, leadership, teaching, and research) that were most value-aligned was negatively correlated with experiencing burnout.⁷ One method of professional development that involves exploring personal values and signature strengths could involve completing the *Value Bulls Eye Exercise*, which is available to download as a free on-line tool through Drexel University.⁸ The results of value clarification in this assessment may then be incorporated into decisions regarding career planning. For example, if a core value of teamwork is revealed, it may be increase one's sense of meaning in work to increase participation in committee work or multidisciplinary conferences. In this way, gaining clarity around ones values provides a foundation upon which work related tasks and behaviors can then be individualized and aligned in such a way as to create an intentional and individual experience of work that provides a greater sense of meaning.

Focus on Nature of the Work Not on Success/Outcome

*"Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."*⁵

Meaningful work can become its own reward and replace external recognition as a factor motivating behavior. In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink explores relationship between work and reward. Pink provides an overview as to how behavioral scientists categorize work as either "algorithmic" or "heuristic."⁹ A task that is algorithmic has a known set of instructions as to how to complete the chore. Conversely, heuristic tasks ask a worker to solve a problem for which the solution is unknown and therefore requires departure from algorithm and a foray into the realm of creativity. It is the heuristic type of work where intrinsic motivation is stimulated and Pink presents evidence that applying external rewards and punishments is effective when incentivizing algorithmic tasks but works conversely where heuristic work is concerned, undermining drive toward creative work. Therefore, the type of work that is apt to bring the most meaning to an individual is work driven by intrinsic motivation and personal meaning not related to external reward or recognition.

As medical students and residents, our educational system has reinforced those behaviors resulting in external accomplishments and accolades as a pathway to career advancement, that is, high board scores and this is exemplified by the value placed on high performance on standardized tests. However, as practicing physicians seeking meaningful work we may need to shift this framework and direct our efforts toward activities may not necessarily build a better curriculum vitae but a more balanced and value aligned life. One qualitative study investigating what physicians found most meaningful in their work highlighted that humanistic themes held more meaning than

scientific/diagnostic reasoning as meaning was most pronounced when (1) a connection occurred with a patient, (2) the doctor made a difference in someone's life and finally (perhaps most interestingly), and (3) when the physician had a shift in perspective.¹⁰ Much of the practice of medicine is algorithmic and therefore physician autonomy may be best exercised in the pursuit of creative and humanistic endeavors. Although physicians ascend the ranks of our medical education system and residency training paradigm by achieving external markers of success, shifting our work toward those activities that are most meaningful may deepen one's sense of purpose without the necessary prerequisite of external validation.

Choose Your Attitude

*"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*⁵

Positive psychology has informed work in the arena of physician resilience with the PERMA Model (positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning, and achievement) well-being inclusive of gratitude practice.¹¹ Physicians choosing to develop a personal gratitude practice may initiate a process whereby they "practice" looking at life through an appreciative lens ultimately finding more meaning through the process of paying greater attention to the positive than the negative. Physicians may be at a greater risk for cynicism in that scientific reasoning teaches one to look for what is wrong with a situation or person that is, to search for "disease" rather than appreciating what is working well. Gratitude practices flip this search pattern. Gratitude can be defined as a positive emotion that reflects appreciation or thankfulness for what is meaningful. There is an interesting relationship in that gratitude practice can reveal over time those aspects of life one finds most meaningful. A study among health care workers (including physicians) using the "Three Good Things" daily reflective writing method of gratitude expression, demonstrated that participants reported common themes in their gratitude expression that involved (1) having a good day at work, (2) making meaningful use of self-determined time, and (3) having supportive relationships.¹² These themes reflect the inherent intersection between the positive emotion of gratitude and finding meaning in experience. Choosing to cultivate the habit of a gratitude practice is a way to choose our perspective in life, recognizing and reaching toward opportunities that deepen our sense of meaning.

Cognitive Reappraisal and Sense of Humor Build Resilience

*"It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. . . . The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living."*⁵

Evidence suggests that humor is a powerful tool in building resilience by mediating meaning through the process of cognitive reappraisal. Positive cognitive reappraisal allows one to experience a neutral or adverse event and reframe the experience in such a way as to extract positive meaning.¹³ Furthermore, increased capacity for cognitive reappraisal has been shown to be an adaptive mechanism reducing likelihood of developing depression in the face of high levels of stress. One way that humor mediates both stress and meaning is by providing a mechanism whereby unpleasant realities may be experienced and tolerated with less aversion, providing distance and perspective.

Humor can be intentional or spontaneous, takes a small amount of time and energy but does require the presence to pause, face the reality of a difficult situation, and allow space for laughter to replace cynicism. For even in one of the worst situations mankind has known—those

encountered in a concentration camp—inmates were able to connect with their humanity through laughter.

Conclusion

Medicine has traditionally attracted individuals who are not only highly driven but also oriented toward meaning and purpose, as illustrated in the introductory clinical vignette. Unfortunately, environmental factors often conspire to frustrate the will to meaning in these individuals, predisposing driven individuals to workplace burnout. The pursuit of meaning is quite distinct from the pursuit of happiness, and may include periods of hardship or disappointment. Taking an inventory of one's core strengths and values to ensure that these are appropriately aligned with one's professional goals and responsibilities is associated with improved performance and engenders a sense of well-being, as illustrated in the introductory vignette when Mary aligns her work-related activities with her values. Whenever possible, radiologists should be encouraged to leverage their autonomy toward dedicating a portion of their professional effort to heuristic and humanistic challenges that are value-congruent.

Ultimately, however, it is up to each individual to choose how they wish to orient to the challenges each career presents. Practicing gratitude can promote changes in behavior as well as neurochemistry increasing the experience of positive emotions and lead one toward increased time engaging in those activities imbued with meaning. Finally, humor is a simple, effective, and accessible tool that provides us an opportunity for positive cognitive reappraisal. In the case of Mary, her sense of humor allowed connection with a colleague and was accessed in times of stress as an adaptive mechanism that

eventually led her toward more authentic work. Such practices outlined in this paper offer avenues through which radiologists can integrate the principles outline in Frankle's treatise in order to create more a greater sense of purpose at work, and increase our sense of meaning through conscious endeavor.

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