



Finding balance in a new field



After narrowly avoiding burnout a decade ago, Dr. Harry Zeit now teaches self-care to physicians

BY CAROL HILTON

When Dr. Harry Zeit began his career in medicine three decades ago, he felt most at home in the emergency room. “There’s something so special about the ER, because in a way, it’s very democratic,” said the Toronto physician. “You don’t have the stratification of, ‘You’re the nurse, you’re the paramedic, I’m the doctor.’ It was very much, ‘We’re all in this together.’” Reflecting on it now, he said he appreciated how straightforward the care was, and that the structure of the job allowed him to have a life outside of medicine.

As time went on, however, increasing stress levels and cutbacks within the health-care system altered the once-harmonious environment. Speaking in a calm, gentle voice, Dr. Zeit admitted he luckily never reached a state of burnout where he became exhausted and detached, lacking a sense of meaning in his life. However, he recognized that, after more than two decades in the ER, he needed a change.

In his 40s, Dr. Zeit retrained as a GP psychotherapist. “Because I had something new going for me, I feel it was a precious gift to be able to work in the ER,” he said. Today, Dr. Zeit uses his newly developed expertise (and healthy attitude) to help physicians deal with their own stressful lives in his “Caring for Self While Caring for Others” workshop series in Toronto, offered through the Ontario Medical Association.

Career change

Though he didn’t realize it at the time, Dr. Zeit’s transition from emergency medicine to GP psychotherapy actually began back in 2002, three years before he officially changed specialties. At that time, he started attending yoga retreats to deal with tension at work, and the stress of going through a marital separation. He also spent the year training in a program at the Transpersonal Therapy Centre in Toronto, though he wasn’t there for work—he was doing it for himself.

During this time, he cut back on his ER work and, as he became more serious about psychotherapy, decided that if he were to make a career switch, he should do it while he still had the energy. So, in 2005, Dr. Zeit left the ER, took a couple of months off, and then joined the staff at Dr. Michael Paré’s Medical Clinic for Person-Centred Psychotherapy in Toronto.

While learning on the job at Dr. Paré’s clinic, it took a year and a half for Dr. Zeit to change his scope of practice with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. “The first year of therapy is really funky because there’s no way to be fully trained, unless you did grad school in social work,” he said. During this initial year at the clinic, he would meet a new patient and read everything he could find about their condition. “Medicine doesn’t have formal psychotherapy training, but doctors are pretty good at learning as we go. I knew that would be one hard year and then I’d have the fundamentals.”

As time passed, helping patients deal with horrible, traumatic experiences began to take a toll on Dr. Zeit. He realized he needed ways to take care of himself and dissociate from the negative energy he had picked up during the day. Aware that having a support network is a key aspect in helping people deal with trauma, Dr. Zeit looked beyond himself to see how he might be able to help his fellow physicians cope with similar struggles. “Medicine had community before,” he said. “When I first started working, people ate lunch in the cafeteria and chatted together. That was all we needed, but that community has been ripped apart.”

This desire for a support network led to the development of the “Caring for Self While Caring for Others” series, which is now in its third season. Held at the OMA’s headquarters in Toronto, these free two-hour sessions qualify for continuing education credits. Dr. Zeit discusses up-to-date information on burnout and compassion fatigue and offers coping strategies that go beyond the standard interventions provided in basic physician wellness programs. The importance of finding new meaning in life and the need for community-building are emphasized, since, for most doctors, the usual recommendations of rest and mindfulness practices are not enough. There’s also an instructor who does exercises, such as yoga or breath work, to encourage relaxation.

Helping others

Dr. Shailla Vaidya, a Toronto family physician who opened a stress-reduction practice in 2013, said the sessions not only taught her to pay attention to her own needs, but also added to her patient care toolbox. Most importantly, however, she said the talks reminded her she was not alone. “The biggest benefit is connecting with others,” she said. “The sessions provide a space for camaraderie—a ‘doctors’ lounge’ that many of us working in private practice are missing.”

Breaking the feeling of isolation was also important to Irit Israeli, a clinical social worker and therapist in nearby Thornhill, Ont. She said working with clients who are suicidal or who self-harm could be quite scary, and she sometimes had disturbed sleep and excessive worries as a result.

Some people have suggested Dr. Zeit provide the sessions in an online format, but Israeli said attending in person and interacting with the group was ideal. “The various participants enriched the presentation with their questions and their unique experiences,” she said. “As human beings, we thrive on connections and being with others who understand us.”

Dr. Zeit echoed similar sentiments, stating “there are a lot of doctors who are in pain, and they’re bearing it quite heroically. My hope is that the workshops will touch people, and by devoting more time to their own growth, to their own mind and bodies, to their mindfulness of living in a complicated world, that life can be richer.”

Dr. Zeit hopes to eventually offer a weekend retreat for health-care workers. For now, his next sessions take place on Jan. 21, Feb. 19 and March 19.

Follow Dr. Harry Zeit’s blog and find out more about the “Caring for Self While Caring for Others” series at wildpsychotherapyfrontier.blogspot.ca.



The sessions provide a space for camaraderie.

—Dr. Shailla Vaidya