My Burnout Story
by jk2185, BSN, RN ‼

I’m a CVICU nurse that recently broke down and quit due to the experiences, death and suffering in particular. I’m a victim of burnout and PTSD. I’m hoping to publish to get my story out so it reaches other nurses or providers in the same situation.

I’ve been crying all morning coming from a pain so deeply repressed and locked inside me. I watched my last patient die three days ago and leave in his wake a broken family truly taken to the depths of misery and suffering. It was unexpected as most seem to be in an Intensive Care Unit. A hopeful wife of 20 years who claimed to have found her soulmate blindsided by her husband’s death.

I remember the daughter’s face when she came to the bedside while I was performing futile CPR, a gasp of horror unknown to most people. Empty eyes and an instantly drained soul. They both, the wife and daughter, threw themselves on his body begging him to return from the dead.

How many times have I seen this? Too many to count. Each time, I myself have felt the distinct pain of death and sorrow and stuffed in a vault deep in my psyche hoping to never release it. How many times have I been bestowed the “privilege” to give people the worst news of their lives.

"Hi, I'm so and so, we've done everything we can, I'm sorry."

"Hi, I'm so and so, your husband's stroke was catastrophic and unrecoverable. He may not make it through today."

"Hi, I'm so and so, you are going to die and I'll be here to help you and make it as smooth as possible."

Ever had a day where you got sent home because both of your patients died? Ever cleaned a dead body for the morgue, then gone to your 30-minute lunch break (and you only get 30 minutes, no more)?

Several deaths I pin on myself. I lost two patients last year which I "know" I had a hand in. I should have known this, I should have done that. Of course, people tell me it wasn't my fault. Does that help? No....it’s a deep knowing and a horde of permanent memories I will take to my grave.

Then there's the clinical stress.

(continue)
Am I doing the right thing? Do I know what I'm doing? Ever looked at a med vial 5 or 6 times because you keep second-guessing what you're giving? I used to go home after a shift and read up on things I encountered during a shift that I was unsure of. I used to read textbooks for leisure. I've got ACLS forwards and backwards. Pretty sure I can interpret rhythms better than some of the residents. I'm not trying to toot my own horn; just pointing out that this drive (which according to popular belief is a good thing) has driven me off the cliff into a world of immense suffering.

Maybe I just don't know how to cope.

I thought having a couple beers or glasses of wine was the way to do it. Laughing with your coworkers about how messed up your day was or just venting to your innocent spouse. OR MAYBE, there's a better way to do this so that able people like myself aren't lost in this dark forest of despair. I've heard of certain facilities offering post-death huddles or post-major event huddles. Now I understand that's not plausible on a unit where 2-4 people die or have a major event a day, but something has to give. You're supposed to "buck up," or my favorite I've been told is "this is a sink or swim place." HA!!! What a joke. No wonder I'm where I'm at today. People aren't meant to be able to handle these kinds of stresses at their full-time job. I do remember a clinical instructor I had (a critical care guru) telling me that ICU nurses typically have a two-year shelf-life before changing disciplines. I remember thinking, "what weaklings, two years is nothing; I can do it."

It's torn a hole in me. I quit my job yesterday. I don't sleep. The formerly strong, I can do anything, level one center, highest acuity, give me the sickest of the sick gunslinging cowboy has changed. I'm having trouble leaving my apartment. Time to get a good psychologist. I don't know if I'll be able to ever touch a patient again. This is hands-down the hardest thing I've ever done. I hope I can heal. I hope this reaches someone else out there experiencing something similar. Burnout and PTSD are real. Don't let them steal your life.

Sincerely,

Another Broken Healer