Compassion starts within: Mental health and wellbeing for healthcare professionals

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With burnout being common among healthcare professionals, Dr Dianne Wepa and Tanya Levin discuss practical strategies for supporting the mental health of healthcare workers

Healthcare professionals are the backbone of every society, yet they are often the most neglected when it comes to their own mental health and wellbeing. Burnout, compassion fatigue and moral injury are not just buzzwords; they are daily realities for nurses, doctors and allied health professionals. Informed by the work of Dr Dianne Wepa, such as cultural safety and self-compassion, this short guide draws on practical strategies for supporting the mental health of healthcare workers.

The weight of care

Healthcare professionals face high expectations, long hours and emotionally taxing environments. According to Wepa (2024), burnout affects nearly 40% of nurses and over 50% of doctors globally. Add to this the pressures of understaffing, constant exposure to trauma and bureaucratic overload, and you have a recipe for chronic stress and declining mental health (Rotenstein et al., 2023).

Simpson et al., (2023) reminds us that mental health challenges cannot be understood in isolation from context. Cultural, organisational and individual factors all interact, and it is not enough to tell workers to 'do self-care' without addressing workplace systems and cultural safety.

Cultural safety in mental health

Dr Dianne Wepa, a leading voice in Indigenous and cross-cultural health, advocates for cultural safety as a foundation for all mental health work. Cultural safety is not about learning cultural facts; it is about reflecting on one's own assumptions and the power dynamics at play in care relationships (Wepa, 2015).

When applied to staff wellbeing, cultural safety involves asking:

- Are workplaces inclusive?
- Do professionals feel respected and valued?
- Are there safe ways to raise concerns or express vulnerability? If not, no amount of mindfulness apps or resilience workshops will address the deeper systemic issues.

Healthcare organisations must foster environments where diverse staff feel culturally and psychologically safe. This includes ensuring First Nations, migrant, and minority professionals have a voice in shaping workplace practices and wellbeing initiatives (Thompson et al., 2012).

Self-compassion: A necessary practice

In an environment that prizes stoicism, healthcare professionals often struggle with self-compassion. Yet as Wepa (2024) highlights, self-compassion can be a protective factor against burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Kristen Neff (2011) identifies three core components of self-compassion:

1. Self-kindness:
    Being gentle with yourself rather than self-critical.
2. Common humanity:
    Recognising that suffering and imperfection are part of being human.
3. Mindfulness:
    Observing your thoughts and feelings without suppressing or exaggerating them.

Practising self-compassion is not self-indulgence. It builds emotional resilience, supports clearer decision- making and promotes a healthier professional identity (Begin et al., 2024).

Five practical steps to foster wellbeing

Based on the principles of Wepa (2024), here are five practical steps:

1. Create reflective space:
    Set aside five to ten minutes per shift to pause and reflect. Journaling, short-guided reflections, or debriefing with a trusted peer can help process emotional strain (McCloughen et al., 2020).
2. Challenge the internal critic:
    Notice when your inner dialogue is harsh or unforgiving. Would you speak to a colleague the same way? Reframe it with kindness (Neff, 2011).
3. Use cultural anchors:
    Draw on cultural or spiritual values that give you strength, emotional restoration, identity affirmation and a sense of connection to ancestors and values. Whether it is a proverb, meditation or prayer, cultural anchoring fosters identity, wellbeing and belonging (Pearse, 2023).
4. Micro-boundaries matter:
    You may not be able to control your roster, but you can take small steps – a proper lunch break, saying no to extra shifts, switching off emails after hours and resisting productivity pressure. These micro-boundaries protect energy that can be focused on one's health and wellbeing (Widdicks et al., 2022).

5. Normalise asking for help:
   Reach out to EAP services, peer networks or cultural advisors. Seeking support is not a weakness – it is a skill.

The role of leadership

Workplace wellbeing is not just a personal issue; it is leadership's responsibility. Managers and executives must model self-compassion, invest in culturally safe supervision, and design systems that protect against burnout (West et al., 2020).

Culturally safe leadership means being accountable, listening to feedback from all staff and understanding the histories and identities that shape their experiences. When leadership validates the emotional reality of frontline work, it builds trust and retention.

Beyond resilience

Resilience is often treated as the answer to burnout, but it can become a cover for systemic failure. As Wepa and others argue, what healthcare workers need is not just to be tougher but to be better supported.

By integrating self-compassion with cultural safety, we move from a model of endurance to one of genuine care for others and ourselves. Mental health and wellbeing are not luxuries. They are the foundation of ethical, sustainable healthcare.

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