Doctor, heal thyself

Part 1:
Most of us have heard the expression, ‘Put on your own oxygen mask first’, when listening to the safety instructions of the airline crew on a flight. In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop automatically from the panel above you, the instruction is then to see to it that your mask is fitted before attending to others who might need assistance. This life-saving advice is given with good reason: you can only adequately care for others when you have taken the necessary steps to take care of yourself.

A large number of doctors I have had the privilege to get to know, over many years in the healthcare industry, have had a tendency to put their well-being and personal development aside because they have been so busy taking care of other ‘more important’ things such as patients, their workplace and/or medical practice issues and colleagues in their pursuit of delivering the best medical care they can. While these are important considerations, nothing beats taking care of oneself: physically, emotionally and developmentally. If a reasonably high level of well-being in these 3 areas is absent, the ability of the individual doctor to take care of others, and effectively manage their practice of medicine, is diminished.

Consider the possibility that your practice of medical care could be more successful and more satisfying if you made focusing on your own well-being and personal development a higher priority. This is often easier said than done. Doctors, being caretakers at heart, tend to put the needs of others before their own, or tend to the issues of medical practice, either in public or private, ahead of everything else, especially self-care and development. Taking the time to evaluate where you may need to pay more attention to yourself, and taking decisive action to do so, will pay dividends, both immediately and in the long term.

To gauge a sense of where you might need to focus more attention, assess yourself on a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being poor and 5 excellent, in the following areas of physical and emotional wellbeing and personal development:

- **Physical condition**
  - Commitment to regular exercise
  - Weight management
  - Stamina; energy levels
  - Strength
  - Flexibility
  - Clinical health – including dental, metabolic and functional
  - Absence of chronic pain
  - Absence of addictions
- **Emotional wellbeing**
  - Optimism
  - Resilience
  - Absence of chronic or acute manageable stress
  - Absence of chronic or acute manageable anxiety
  - Ability to enjoy simple pleasures
• Absence of burnout
  • Positive connection and relations with others
  • Comfortable with personal character and integrity

• Personal development
  • Ability to read others and respond appropriately
  • Listening/communication skills
  • Leadership: ability to motivate others
  • Adapting to and embracing change; flexibility
  • Presence: ability to stay in the moment
  • Compassion and empathy
  • Behaviour aligned with values

Take your time considering these questions and answer them, honestly, for yourself. In the next newsletter we will look at how these conditions can play out in your day-to-day workplace and/or medical practice and steps to consider in overcoming the problems that may arise because of them.

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