

Tammy McCausland:

This is Tammy McCausland, bringing you SROA Soundboard, SROA's podcast for radiation oncology administrators. I'm joined by Jennifer Moss, a workplace expert, international public speaker and award winning author. She is the best-selling and award-winning author of "Unlocking Happiness At Work." Welcome, Jen.

Jennifer Moss:

Hello, good morning.

Tammy McCausland:

I wanted to ask you some questions about burnout. My first question is how did you come to study burnout? (0:29)

Jennifer Moss:

Well, it's interesting. I've been researching and studying workplace happiness for ... Since 2012. But I've been working in the HR behavioral sciences industry for a while before that. As you go through the process of learning about what makes people happy at work, you also realize what contributes to their unhappiness. There's only really 13% of the workplace, the global workforce that is engaged and happy at work. So there's a huge swath of people that aren't. And so throughout the last decade I've really started to focus then more on what are the things that are causing the stress, what are the things that we can do in leadership to prevent it? And through that I really started to understand that burnout was a major problem, and chronic stress and long-term stress had some very serious negative implications on health.

Tammy McCausland:

It's interesting you say that, because the term burnout was coined in 1970s. So why has it taken so long to give burnout the attention it deserves? (1:40)

Jennifer Moss:

I think that that's a very good question because I think there's myriad reasons why that's the case. Mostly because people weren't, or leadership wasn't really seeing the financial implications, the outcomes of people's health and how that impacted the bottom line. And what's so sad about that is that we do often need to have these outcomes and measure these metrics for leadership and large organizations to pay attention. And so I think data's really helped in the last 20 years where more people have relied on data to see how all of these issues at work impact a whole host of financial reasons. But then also there's a lot of leadership that really care about their employees. I don't want to put everyone in that bucket because I have worked with a lot of leadership that truly cares about their employees, and when they see the impact of burnout, it is pretty devastating. And I would note also, specifically in health care, you know, we've seen physician and nurse burnout ... It actually ends up resulting in suicide or malpractice suits because of exhaustion, and there's a lot of really serious things that happen not just to physicians and nurses, but the patient care is impacted too. So I think that's created a wakeup call for a lot of industries.

Tammy McCausland:

In May, 2019 the World Health Organization classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. Why was that classification important and why was the distinction also important? (3:30)

Jennifer Moss:

It was very important for leaders to be able to say, "Okay, now we need to create systems and infrastructure and practices around it." I don't know if it was helpful in that it didn't actually put leadership in a position where they were the ones accountable. What I think the WHO did is, again, yeah, create some clarity. Especially after 40 years of debating it and arguing it amongst scientists. Making it a workplace definition allows us to then change the focus and change the language of that term, so people understand that it is about being sick at work and chronic stress at work. Burnout is a term that's been tangled up in personal lives, work/life balance. And I think what the WHO wanted to say is, "Here is how burnout happens and there needs to be a definition." And what I want them to do is go further and say this is how organizations need to focus more on their own practices and systems, because those are the things that actually create the burnout. It's not necessarily employees taking too much on at home, or they're a new parent and they're tired, or they're dealing with stress in their personal lives. It really is something that happens at work that creates this chronic stress that leads to burnout.

Tammy McCausland:

The coronavirus pandemic is upon us, and I'm sure it's made burnout even more pressing for healthcare workers. How can administrators help their employees manage stress, so they don't experience burnout? (5:18)

Jennifer Moss:

It's really interesting because right now it's a lot of unknowns. Right at the start of the pandemic, 300 million people were estimated to go into a work from home scenario. So that's a massive amount of the work force that is now just experiencing something that they've never experienced before. And that can create a lot of stress just in the lack of resources they may have, they might not have the proper tools, they may have never used a video conference tool before. There's a lot of shift, and our brains don't particularly love that level of change. We like to learn from it. And in the end of all of this, we will come out feeling more mastery over this from this experience, which is a good thing. But right now people are just sort of dealing with this pervasive underlying stress, and that stress that is being outmatched by the big stress that people are dealing with. We're in a global pandemic. This is a life or death situation. We're watching the news more than we ever have before. So we've got this major stress and then we also add that to what we call the little stresses. But when you look at how our body reacts to threats, our reactions are the same to those quotes unquote "little stuff", as they are to the big stuff. So there's just a lot of ongoing strain on our bodies, on our minds. I would say that at the ... After we go through this, a lot of leaders too will understand, does my workforce do okay in work remote scenarios? And I think in the end that will end up creating a lot more flexibility for those folks that do want to have a work from home situation, or even a flexible sort of two or three days a week working from home. So again, we're learning a lot, but we can also use this as an opportunity as employers to really engage our people, figure out ways to be creative in communicating with them. We have seen a lot of really great examples of exciting creative leadership using technology and bonding people in a way that they may not have been bonded before. Ironically, through technology. So again, it's a learning phase which will

produce some great opportunities and insights, but right now employers need to be really good about fostering relationships and making sure people are still bonded. They need to be checking in and asking how people are doing from their mental health, and then watching for signs of burnout in their employees.

Tammy McCausland:

You mentioned you've seen creative solutions through technology in healthcare. Could you give an example of what you have seen? (8:27)

Jennifer Moss:

Well what ... It's interesting because healthcare is in this unique situation where they're sort of all hands on deck, they're working some pretty intense hours. One of the ways that I've seen it in side of the actual hospitals or in care centers has been that, it's a nontechnical or not a use of technology here, but when I was interviewing Dr Edward Alison who's part of the ... He's actually CEO and president of Kaiser Permanente group in Southern California, and he's trained a group of physicians to be able to handle some ... Not as a therapist, but just be able to handle some mental health issues, in that they don a purple scrub when they go into the hospital. and there's a rotating group, so it's just one at a time. But every day there's a physician wearing a purple scrub, and that purple scrubs signifies I'm here if you need me throughout the day, I'm a person that you can talk to. I'm a safe place. It's a peer support for the rest of the staff, and that person is really a symbol inside of these environments. And so sometimes they don't get access that day, but there's something about the purple scrub that primes people to think, "Okay, if I really need a space, there is a safe space for me to talk, where it's confidential and I can just share with someone how I'm feeling. And I think doing those types of things where there's an ability, especially for healthcare workers right now for them to feel like they have a peer that they can rely on, or there's some moment that they can have that's calm or that's away from dealing with COVID right now, I think that's really important. From a technology standpoint, you have people doing really fun and creative stuff. And again, this might be a little bit lighter than what some of the folks in healthcare right now are dealing with. But anyone that is communicating via Zoom or Slack, you've had some organizations do meditation in the morning. We've seen a lot of companies get together and have a morning coffee, five minute huddle where they don't talk about anything work related. They just sort of grab a coffee, check-in, chat about what's going on, how they're feeling, and then start their day. There's people using Slack and they're changing their avatars to funny things. They're posting jokes of the day. They're starting book clubs online. That's ... Learning about something that's important to their work, but they're talking online weekly about what they're reading. They're sharing ... Four o'clock on Friday, there's some companies that have little family parties. So the kids get to join in on Zoom, for 30 minutes and they do things like magic shows, so they embed the family in. One company has their CEO reading a book to the kids every Friday afternoon.

So again, it's just ways for everyone to stay connected in very meaningful and fun and light and happy ways, which pulls you out a little bit from what we're dealing with right now in the pandemic.

Tammy McCausland:

Those are great examples. How do you think the pandemic will shift the conversation about burnout? (12:16)

Jennifer Moss:

Well, I think what we're going to see is that burnout are the aftershocks from this major event. And we're going to see that right now we're in a really heightened state of fight or flight, and so we've got this emergency mindset going on right now, and we can go as sort of a high level with that constant rush of chemicals in our body, forcing us to stay alert and productive. But when we finally get a relief from this, I see a lot of people kind of letting their guards down, and that's when you see people really become sick. It's kind of like the parent that holds on until all their children finish going through the flu, and then they're the last ones to get it because they've had to be the caregiver. We're going to see that particularly in healthcare. And we're also going to see that in other industries.

There was a physician in New York that's a president of one of the hospitals there, a president and CEO. And what he said is one of the major concerns that he does have is burnout for his staff, and it's extreme burnout, and he thinks that's going to be top of mind for a lot of healthcare leadership after this is done, because you don't want all of the sudden ... You still have to have people there to take care of just the everyday patients. The emergencies that come in there outside of COVID. And that's going to ramp back up where you start to have your hospital's full or your practices full of people that aren't just COVID related, and it's all of your nurses and doctors and your healthcare practitioners are completely exhausted and get sick after all of this, then you're going to have the same stress on the healthcare environment. So, I'm really hoping that we address it. I think right now it's really important, even if we're in that stage of just trying to figure ourselves out as employers or leaders working with our staff who are suddenly remote, or working in these strange conditions. We have to be on the lookout for it and be thinking now about strategies to get people back into a new normal. How do we kind of have these staggered ways of getting people readjusted? We need to be checking in more than ever now. And then we need to have plans for preventing burnout and mitigating burnout and also managing for the people that are burnt out when they go back to work. Really think, what do we have readied? What kind of systems and infrastructure can we build so that when we bring people back into work, we're making sure that it's a healthy, safe place for them.

Tammy McCausland:

In your writing about burnout more generally, you've talked about pebbles, the minor irritants that fester and grow, and about asking better questions. So this kind of ties into what you've said, but also when we normalize, can you explain what kind of things are pebbles, and give examples of better questions administrators can ask. (15:25)

Jennifer Moss:

Yes, so I had an amazing conversation with the foremost expert in burnout. This is Dr Christina Maslach, and she actually created the Maslach Inventory. The Maslach, sorry, burnout inventory. And it's mostly, I would say it's the most widely used across the world in identifying if organizations have burnout if people are feeling burnt out, and she's written quite a few books. She is now retired but still does some talks on the subject when we had the conversation, we in our organization always used the term hygiene factor theory, which is research that focuses just on organizational hygiene, what motivates people and also what just should be table stakes in organizations. So it's very different what motivates people and what is just important for every company to have.

And what happens is some companies just have really poor hygiene and that's like not having the proper tools to do your job. The printer's always broken or you can't get access to the learning. You don't know if you're doing a job, you don't actually have the information to keep you safe on the job. You're not getting paid appropriately, you're not getting paid on time, those kinds of things. That's just really poor hygiene. And so Christina had talked to me about them and sort of when I was speaking with her it

referenced to me that she sort of saw those as pebbles. And I really took to that sort of thinking, because that's exactly what it is. It's like you're just walking around constantly every day and it's these minor irritations that start to foster stress just slowly over time, and then what that happens is that you're just feeling like you're being eroded. Your psychological safety, your mental health is just slowly being eroded, and you can't work like that. So we often talk about that good to great culture where we are adding in all these great perks and we have the benefits of subsidized gym memberships, and yoga and meals being served. We talk about this as the greatest cultures in the world, and we've seen that where that works, but they also have good corporate hygiene. We've seen a lot of organizations where they think, "Okay, I'm going to just put a pool table in here and that's going to solve for all of our culture problem." But then the pool table never gets used, there's dust on it, it's just a reminder that there's a lot of other things underneath the pebbles that people are dealing with that aren't being fixed. So what organizations need to do to understand what those pebbles are, is ask, and this is where data is really important. We need to say to organizations, and get organizations to be asking their employees what is one thing that is bothering you? What is one thing you need to have fixed? If we could give 100 dollars to every person here, what would they do to fix culture? Not the big million dollar projects. And I gave an example in my writing where a CEO put a rooftop pool on, and it was so exciting. He was so proud of this rooftop pool and this track and there's these folks looking out the window, or they know that this pool is on their roof, and meanwhile they have a carpet that's been stuck in their closet and it smells and no one can remove it. They have things like a broken microwave in their lunchroom. They had their cost free coffee taken away. So those are the things that if you really talked and asked and inquired with your employees, then you would get answers to that, and then you could fix culture. Often we can fix culture by just addressing those small burning pebble like issues for people, and which would in the end prevent a lot of people from feeling burnout.

Tammy McCausland:

You recommend also doing micro projects to tackle burnout. How do micro projects work and why are they effective? (20:22)

Jennifer Moss:

Well, a lot of really great research has come out lately in organizational behavior, and just in culture and leadership, and Google's address this again. Google is very data-driven. They find out what works best, they analyze what are their high performing teams and why. They found that if you have clusters of six people, they're the most optimal sized team that works best, and it doesn't necessarily need to have a manager. You just have someone that's sort of identified as a senior leader, but isn't necessarily managing the group. I think there's a lot of new and cool data that's come out of Google that's found this clustered approach to being effective is the best. Some organizations can't necessarily do that, just because of the way that they work and the type of work that they're doing.

But if you're in an organization, you still can find ways to have people working in smaller groups. When you're trying out ways to fix burnout, sometimes it's hard to use a giant scale and tackle everyone's issue at the same time and survey everyone and think, "Okay, I'm going to fix burnout this year and I'm going to survey everyone and then I'm just going to tackle it." It's really hard to do that because things that might be stressful for a team of programmers, which we've found to have personas that are more introverted, or those that are working in front lines or those people that are working in marketing. There's all different types of personalities and ways that people work that are very different from another group. So, the best thing to do when you're analyzing burnout is to start with a small team, figure out what's going on with their group or with their team, and then be able to start tackling solutions in a small way. And then do that across the organization. Yes, you need to have table stakes

and you have corporate hygiene. You need to have trust across the entire organization. You need to have proper pay. You need to have safe working environment. You need to have that across an entire organization. But when it comes to pebbles, the things that are sort of bugging people, you need to start targeting groups and be able to address it at that level. Often you'll find that in the groups that are really feeling burnout, they have a mismatched manager. So, a manager that's in a place that maybe they shouldn't be. Maybe they're someone that was never really going to be a great manager, they just were elevated because they do a really good job as an individual contributor, and that's just the system of moving people up the ladder. Because we have these hierarchical organizations, that's what we do to ... We do that because we think that motivates them, and we do that because we think that's what you're supposed to do. But we need to understand that managers aren't always supposed to be managers, and they are big cause of burnout because they maybe don't know how to do that role. So, understanding where people in leadership are mismatched doesn't mean that they can't be at the organization, that they're not fit to lead there. It's just it's been mismatched. So those are the types of things that you're looking for and you can only really do that in a cluster setting versus across an entire organization. The goal would be that everyone has their own sort of process and programming that goes on in these clusters, and then it creates a contagion and network effect across the whole organization and then everyone's happy. But it isn't a one size fits all process.

Tammy McCausland:

So what do you say to people who may want to try your approach but are skeptical? In that they might say, well this is just another thing that I don't have time to do because healthcare is already stressed and busy, and that's outside of the pandemic. What would your response be to people who are maybe interested but doubtful that they can achieve the kind of things you're talking about? (24:29)

Jennifer Moss:

Well, I think people seem to look at it as a massive problem, which it is. And so then it must require a massive solution. You can start with a group of people that you want to check in on and just ask them, what is one thing that really gets to you? And what would you like me to do to fix that? That could be the start of it. You can have broader sort of approaches to it where you're asking longer sort of more detailed surveys around that like 20 questions, or you can go and take it further to the Maslach burnout inventory. You can do all those things and progress, but you can start right now by saying, "What is the one thing that you need from me and how can I fix it?" Or even have your manager ... All of your managers tasked to ask that one question of their group. Right now in the pandemic, it's hard to maybe be asking frontline workers, what do you need right now? Because the answer is pretty obvious. But I think we can be asking people that are not as still on the front lines those questions, and then once we return to normal, it's, "What can I do for you?"

And I think we still can. I think we can still ask those front line workers, aside from the things that I know you need, time, resources, is there anything else that we can do for you that would make this a little bit easier for you? And it's amazing what you'll get from people. It's amazing what kind of small gestures that they would require to feel a bit better. And those moments where you shift between just asking someone to do their responsibility in their roles to, "You are a human and I care about your wellbeing and I'm going to do what I can to make what you're going through a little bit easier. It changes the dynamic between the corporation and the employee.

So again, it's not a big list, and it can grow and become more of a strategic plan. You can slowly get the data and wrap it together and say, "Okay, this is a theme that I see repeating across all groups." Or I constantly see this one issue pop up all the time. And then that's when you can start to collect all of that

and then make some changes that address themes. And then it becomes an easy implementation into your strategy because you're using small data to be able to define a larger and broader strategy and infrastructure and systems development inside your organization.

Tammy McCausland:

And I understand you're writing a book on burnout. What are you focusing on and what new insights will you be sharing? (27:47)

Jennifer Moss:

Well, the book *Rethinking Burnout*, it's being published by Harvard Business Press, and I write for Harvard consistently on various topics around workplace, leadership, and wellbeing. And the last few years I've really been focusing more on just addressing burnout specifically. The first article was remote employees and burnout, and then it shifted really to where I believe that leadership is missing the point. And WHO, in their announcement, has been extremely helpful in some ways, like I mentioned, in helping define what burnout is and that it's a workforce issue. But what has come out of that is a lot of think tanks and people with sort of surrounding the WHO have started to come up with policy, some support for organizations to think more clearly about it.

And what I have found frustrating with a lot of the literature is that we still go back to self-care when it comes to burnout. And when we push that self-care to the employee, then we say, "Okay, our hands ... We can sort of wash our hands of the responsibility here. We are no longer responsible because now it's about self-care. And even the scientific research says if we have employees practicing yoga or if they're working out or if they use Fitbit or ... We're seeing these analysis of what we have identified as wellness programs and wellbeing programs that are supposed to mitigate burnout, but so much of the literature and scientific research has shown outcomes that they don't work.

So, my job, I feel, is to say, okay, what are the actual causes of burnout, which include workload, it includes not knowing how to do your job. It includes having strained relationships with peers and managers. It's a whole bunch of ... There's a list of things. Gallop has five, but Christina Maslach and her team have around six to eight sorts of examples of what causes burnout, and none of them are going to be cured by self-care. They are all about systems, they're all about leadership and how they can create infrastructure, HR policies inside the organization. Those are the things that are required to be improved so that burnout is mitigated. And yet we still go back to self-care as the cure for burnout.

So, I'm trying to get people to rethink leadership in particular, but just in general, having everyone understand what is burnout for them, how does it look? How we can still have control of our own experience with burnout, how can we try to mitigate it ourselves yet. But what is that relationship between organizations and leadership and the employee so that it's not just on the employee to try to figure out how to cure their own burnout. It's like that idea of the canary in the coal mine. You couldn't have a better metaphor, but it is the idea that we can't keep looking at these people coming out and these birds coming out sick and covered in soot, and sending them back in because we're saying to them, essentially, that it's not the coal mine. And really burnout is the coal mine. We are making people sick. We are creating a lot of psychological damage. They could be off work for a long time. Plus there's a massive amount of financial implications to it. So we can't just ignore it because it's not visible to us. These people are very ill. We're hurting them and we're saying, here's just some more protective gear. Go back inside. We can't do that. And you have to pay for it yourself. Here you go take yoga and you'll feel better about going back to work and you won't have burn out anymore.

It's just not a solution. So we need to all rethink it. We need to come up with the appropriate strategies to fix it, and it has to be a combined effort between employer and employee.

Tammy McCausland:

Sounds like a fascinating book. When will it be published? (32:27)

Jennifer Moss:

It should be out ... We're just starting it now. It should be out by the end of the year. And yeah, it's exciting. I'm very excited about this book because I'm so passionate about trying to put some dent into this very scary epidemic that's happening that people need to be aware of and leadership needs to be aware of. So I'm excited about writing it and I love my editors at Harvard Business Press. They're fantastic. They've edited some exciting books. So yeah, it should be done by the end of the year. And there's another part of the publication where I have a big idea on burnout that should be coming out at the end of the year, and that will sort of distill what the book is going to be about, and launching at the end of 2020.

Tammy McCausland:

That's great, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you today. I appreciate your insights and your time.

Jennifer Moss:

Thank you, Tammy. I appreciate being here.

Tammy McCausland:

For more information, visit www.SROA.org. Thank you.