Psychological Safety in the Workplace: Practical Strategies to Cultivate a Supportive Environment

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Learning Objectives

- Define psychological safety and recognize its significance in healthcare settings.
- Identify practical strategies to foster psychological safety within teams, including communication techniques and leadership practices.
- Recognize barriers to psychological safety in the workplace and implement approaches to overcome these challenges.

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Psychological safety - definition and implications

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Definition

Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality

Psychological safety is “the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes and that the team is a safe environment for interpersonal risk taking.”

McKinsey & Company

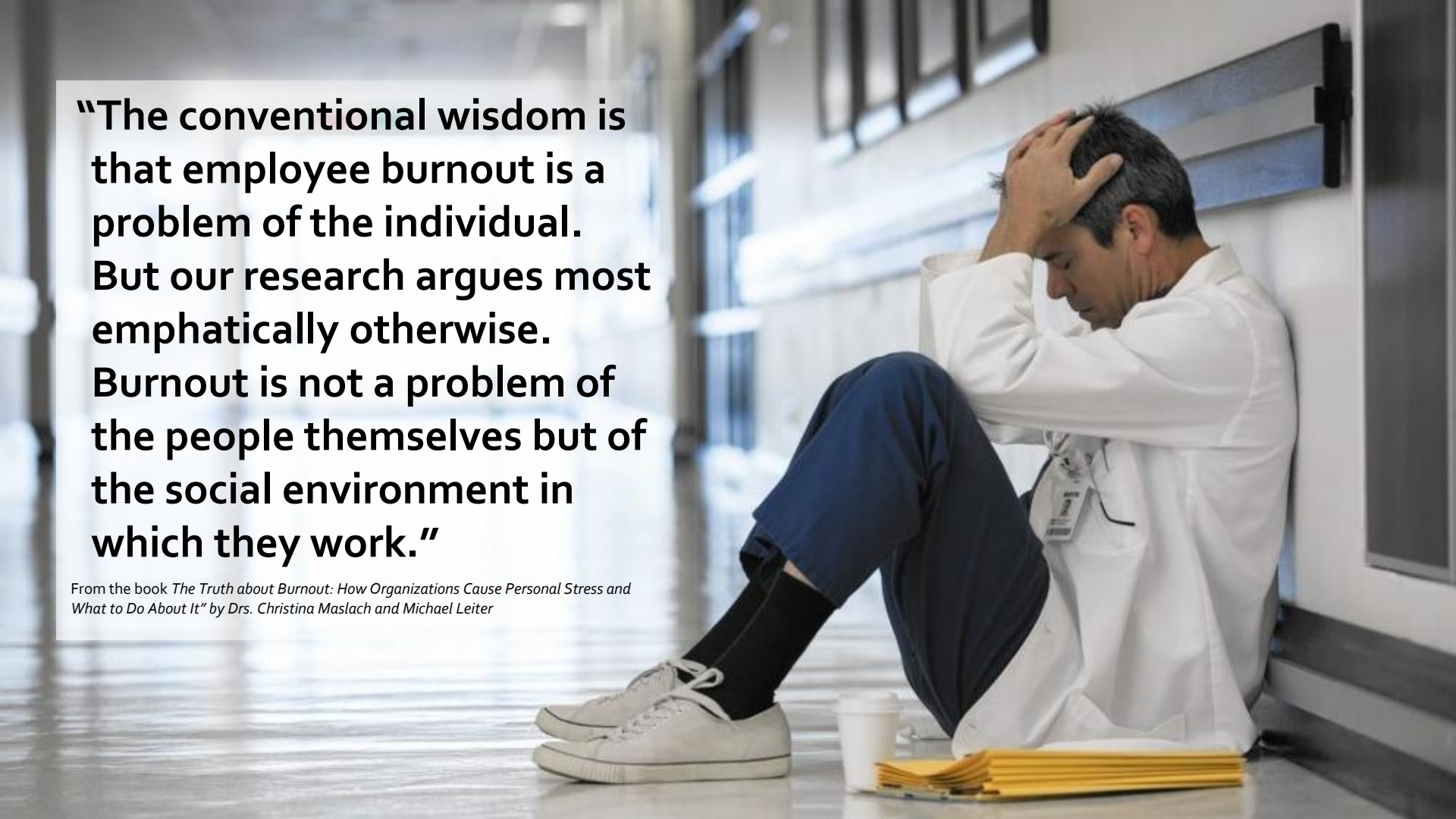
Psychological safety is “the absence of interpersonal fear.”

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Benefits for organizations, teams, and individuals

- Reduces medical errors
- Improves patient outcomes
- Surfaces diverse ideas and points of view
- Enhances interpersonal teamwork
- Promotes continuous learning
- Promotes staff wellbeing

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"The conventional wisdom is that employee burnout is a problem of the individual. But our research argues most emphatically otherwise. Burnout is not a problem of the people themselves but of the social environment in which they work."
From the book *The Truth about Burnout: How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What to Do About It" by Drs. Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter*

Root Causes of Burnout

from ***The Truth about Burnout*** by Drs. Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter



The challenge

Does a psychologically safe culture mean that …

- *Any individual* can speak up
- At *any time*
- In *any setting*
- With *any concern*

  … without accountability or responsibility for how their message is expressed or affects other team members?

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Advancing a supportive, psychologically safe culture

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Key principles in adoption and sustainability

- Frame psychological safety as a means, not an end, to improve safety, teamwork, patient engagement, and the work environment
- Assess and collaboratively explore current organizational culture to understand strengths and gaps in psychological safety
- Implement professional development focused on helping individuals develop the communication skills and practices that are the underpinnings of a supportive, psychologically safe culture
- Job 1 for leaders: consistently model the psychologically safe practices and behaviors they want their teams to adopt

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Practical, tactical adoption

- Assess the current workforce culture related to psychological safety
  - Start with existing research (e.g., patient experience surveys, provider and staff engagement studies)
  - Supplement with qualitative research (in-depth interviews and focus groups) at all levels to explore specific strengths and concerns regarding psychological safety principles and practices
  - Use targeted quantitative surveys to broaden engagement and voice
- Implement training to help individuals understand and appreciate the *what*, *how*, and *why* of a psychologically safe culture
  - Senior leaders must *promote*, not simply *permit*, psychological safety as a core operating principle
  - Defer to *expertise*, not hierarchy or title

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Practical, tactical adoption

- Support improvement in interpersonal communication skills and practices that are essential to a supportive, psychologically safe culture
  - Active listening
  - Visible acknowledgment and respect for others' points of view
  - Attention to non-verbal cues
  - Ability to constructively disagree
- Develop the resolve and skill to constructively counsel individuals who violate psychological safety principles

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The differentiator

How we adopt and encourage a psychologically safe culture determines how influential and beneficial it is in achieving stated goals

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Jefferson Health

Psychological Safety in the Workplace: Practical Strategies to Cultivate a Supportive Environment

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Learning Objectives

- Recognize barriers to psychological safety in their workplace and implement approaches to overcome these challenges.

- Build shared accountability across the team for nurturing a supportive, transparent work environment, recognizing and address behaviors that diminish a sense of psychological safety among team members.

Psychological Safety Is Shaped by the Environment

Day to Day Stressors

- Access pressures
- Productivity targets
- Financial constraints
- Staffing shortages
- Regulatory demands
- Meeting overload
- Change fatigue
- Speed of decision making



How to Overcome Barriers to Psychological Safety

Barriers: Assuming Psychological Safety Exists

Psychological safety is not determined by a leader's intention. It is determined by the team's experience.

WHAT LEADERS MAY SAY

- "My door is always open."
- "People know they can come to me."
- "They know they can speak up."
- "They can push back."

INTENTION

WHAT SAFETY LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

- ✓ Concerns are raised before problems escalate.
- ✓ Dissenting opinions are voiced, especially upward.
- ✓ Questions and mistakes are discussed without humiliation.
- ✓ The response invites continued candor, even under pressure.

EXPERIENCE

"the ***belief*** that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes and ***that the team is a safe environment*** for interpersonal risk taking."

Barrier: Operational Pressures

When operational pressure increases, psychological safety requires intentional practices.

COMMON OPERATIONAL BARRIERS

- Competing priorities
- Access demands
- Productivity expectations
- Time scarcity
- Constant change

COUNTER WITH INTENTIONAL DESIGN →

PRACTICE APPROACHES

Separate urgency from importance
- Distinguish immediate decisions from decisions that need dialogue

Create structured opportunities for input
- Round-robin discussion
- Check before decisions *"What are we missing?"*
- Anonymous feedback channels

Make dissent part of the process
- Assign a devil's advocate in advance
- Intentionally seek unintended consequences

Close the loop
- Explain what happened with concerns that were raised

Barrier: Culture

Culture teaches people whether it is safe to contribute.

COMMON CULTURAL BARRIERS

- Hierarchy
- Historical mistrust
- Fear of consequences
- Lack of transparency

COUNTER WITH INTENTIONAL DESIGN →

PRACTICE APPROACHES

Leaders model fallibility
- "I may be missing something."
- "I changed my mind."

Defer to expertise, not title
- Ask who knows the most, not who ranks highest

Increase transparency
- Clarify decisions
- Explain rationale
- Communicate tradeoffs

Normalize respectful challenge
- Reward thoughtful disagreement
- Celebrate questions, not just answers

Barriers: Individuals Show Up Differently

Confidence grows when people repeatedly experience that their voice matters.

COMMON CULTURAL BARRIERS

- Conflict avoidance
- Empathy
- Perfectionism
- Previous experiences
- Lack of confidence

COUNTER WITH INTENTIONAL DESIGN →

PRACTICE APPROACHES

Build communication skills
- Giving feedback
- Receiving feedback
- Constructive disagreement

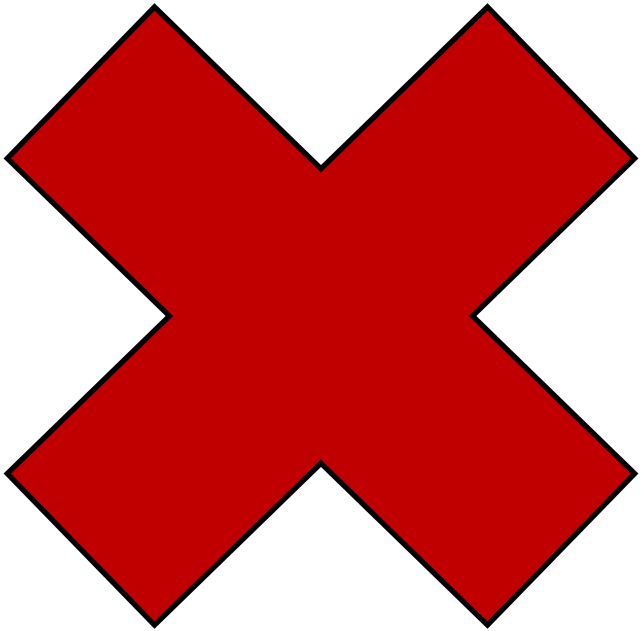
Use curiosity before judgment
- Ask questions before making assumptions

Practice speaking up early
- Raise concerns when they are small

Develop confidence through support
- Coaching
- Mentorship
- Peer support

What does Psychological Safety Look Like?

Not Like This | Behaviors That Diminish Psychological Safety



- Interrupting others
- Talking over colleagues
- Public criticism
- Dismissive responses
- Excluding people from decisions
- Failure to follow through on commitments
- Using hierarchy as leverage
- Retaliation or perceived retaliation
- Gossiping about concerns raised

Like This | The Response Teaches the Team

People judge psychological safety less by the invitation to speak and more by the response that follows.

"I am concerned that the productivity target could create unintended consequences to patients and us as caregivers"

Physician in a department meeting

ACKNOWLEDGE	*"Thank you for raising that."*
EXPLORE	"Help me understand the specific risk you are seeing." "We may still need to meet the target, but we should understand the tradeoffs and determine what safeguards are needed."
CLARIFY	Explain what can change, what cannot, and why.
CLOSE THE LOOP	Return with the decision, action, or rationale.

And This | Damage Control

"I want to pause. That concern was raised last month, but we moved past it before understanding it."

"The response may have made it more difficult for others to contribute. Let's reopen the conversation."

"We still need to make a decision today, but we can do that without dismissing the concern."

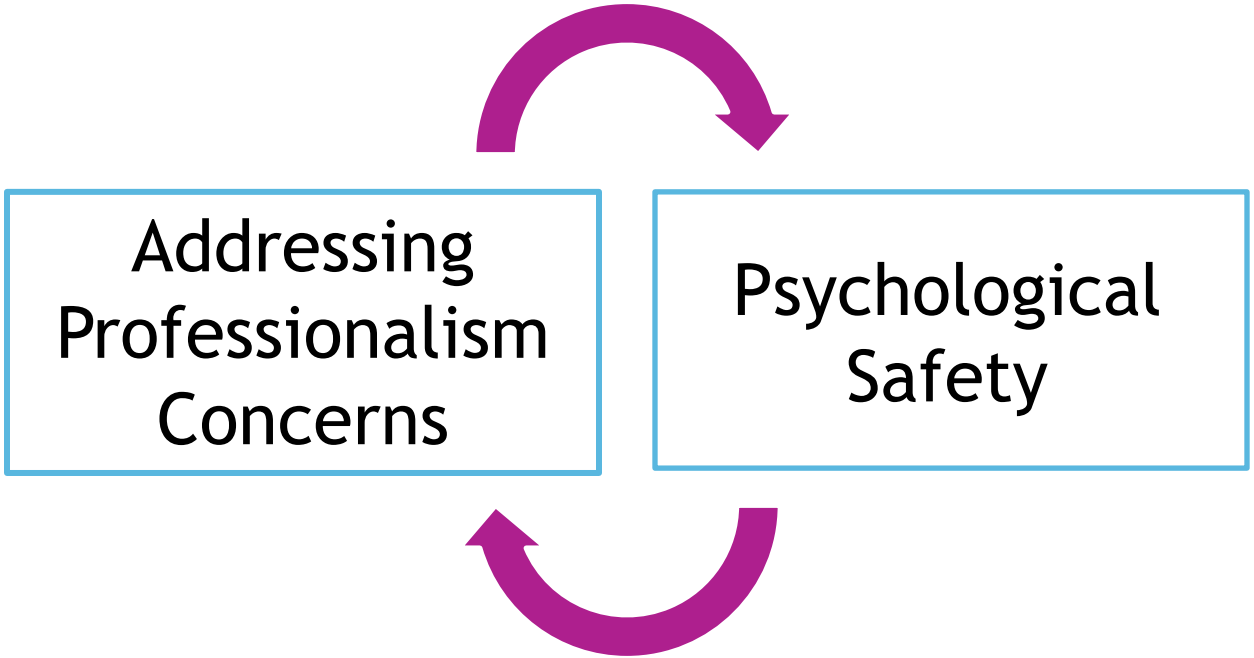
ADDRESS THE BEHAVIOR
- Name the observable behavior
- Describe its impact
- Restate the team expectation

REPAIR THE INTERACTION
- Acknowledge the impact
- Reopen the conversation
- Invite the perspective that was interrupted/dismissed

LEARN AND PREVENT RECURRENCE
- Identify the pressure or condition that contributed
- Reinforce team norms
- Use coaching or the professionalism process when needed

Systems for Shared Accountability

Professionalism Sustains Psychological Safety



Make Speaking Up a System, Not an Act of Courage



REPORT

- Create easy to access form to report incidents of unprofessional behaviors.

REVIEW

- Bi-weekly review the incidents with senior leaders across your organization. Reporter information is redacted.
- Escalate as appropriate for egregious or mandated reports

ASSIGN

- Select and assign a trained peer messenger. Assign by role, specialty, and location when possible.

SHARE

- Peer messenger has a 3-5-minute conversation making them award a report was filed. They are not there to play referee or to debrief.

Shared Accountability for Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is maintained through everyday behaviors and the willingness to address those that diminish trust, respect, and belonging.

Who Sustains It



What Shared Accountability Looks Like

SPEAK	Raise concerns respectfully and early.
LISTEN	Receive input with openness and curiosity.
NAVIGATE	Manage disagreement professionally.
ADDRESS	Intervene when behavior undermines trust.
REPAIR	Acknowledge harm and restore the relationship.

Psychological Safety Is Tested in Moments

A concern is raised.

A mistake is admitted.

A question challenges the status quo.

A dissenting opinion is offered.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Psychological Safety Erodes

- Defensiveness
- Dismissal
- Interruption
- Hierarchy

Psychological Safety Grows

- Curiosity
- Listening
- Exploration
- Empathy