As I begin my second decade as a practicing physical therapist, I would be lying if I said I never felt the proverbial “burnout” that we now hear so much about. Occupational burnout in the healthcare fields has been studied since the late 70’s, when trends of higher burnout compared to other professions were identified. Skip ahead over fifty years and a global pandemic later and I think we are seeing numbers skyrocket. The sports physical therapy profession, specifically, involves lengthy relationships with patients over the course of weeks to many months, and typically has a certain level of pressure involved in restoring an athlete back to competitive level. As healthcare providers, this fuels many if not all of us, and if that were the extent of the pressure, I think burnout would be incredibly low. Now add to this the mounting productivity demands, overwhelming student debt payments, documentation loads, and the attempt at a balance between work and personal life while trying to give your patients your very best, every day. These mental and physical stressors are present in some form to all of us. I certainly don’t have this all figured out, but in my experience, I feel there are two anchors that have helped me avoid hitting “rock bottom” burnout – self-care and mentorship.

When I think about self-care, this is not a spa weekend or reading a self-help book, although both are great and welcomed efforts! I’d view this more as a fluid learning and understanding of what balance you personally need in your current season of life as a healthcare professional. Something as simple as a regular workout routine may be enough to keep you on your game currently, but a few years from now that might look like the desire and need for quality time with family between your last patients of the day and putting your child to bed at night. These two scenarios are different, but one is no more or less important. Making time for what helps to keep you enjoying these trips around the sun is what will make for a physical therapist who can thrive in a chaotic environment.

In September, the American Physical Therapy Association announced its Fit 4 Practice Campaign which will launch mid-October for National Physical Therapy Month. It provides resources and opportunities for clinicians centered around the following four pillars:

1. **Movement**: physical strength and mobility.
2. **Restoration**: sleep and nutrition.
3. **Resiliency**: mental health and stress management.
4. **Practice fitness**: professional development and practice management.

I applaud the APTA for this initiative, and hope it gets more professionals considering the various opportunities around them to care for their physical, mental, and emotional needs. The fourth pillar, practice fitness, takes me to my second anchor noted above – mentorship.

To not just survive but thrive as a sports physical therapist, you need mentors along the way. It has been my observation that there is no shortage of seasoned sports physical therapists willing to help the younger generation. However, the expectation that this assistance and guidance will fall into your lap unsolicited seems to have led to a younger generation of professionals who are frustrated with their trajectory.

I attend many meetings and continuing education courses, and when I look around I see people spending most of their time socializing and mingling with people they already know, predominantly in the same stage of their career. I encourage every young professional or those seeking growth in the world of sports physical therapy to step outside their comfort zone, and simply start with a handshake and a thank you to those who have come before you. Engage in conversations with the people who wrote your textbooks and the research you rely on. But more than anything, be proactive. If you want a mentor, YOU and you alone are responsible for driving that relationship and putting in the time and effort to grow that relationship. Don't get me wrong, your mentor needs to show up, but they are not responsible for seeking you out. That may sound rude or harsh, but in ten, twenty, or thirty years, if you do exactly that, you will look back and realize how significant those choices were, and you too will be on the giving end of mentorship.

If you aren't sure where to start, I'd encourage you to attend meetings where the team approach to sports medicine is the focus. Relationships and support from other therapists, as well as athletic trainers, physicians, and industry representatives, can all play a role in your growth and success as a sports physical therapist. Interacting with orthopedic surgeons and sports medicine physicians should be a regular part of your life. Meetings and courses that incorporate the entire team encourage these interactions and provide a wealth of information to us as physical therapists, both didactically and socially. Attend, shake hands, exchange contacts, and FOLLOW UP! As the saying goes, “the fortune is in the follow up.” If you give Kevin Wilk, Mike Reinold, Kristian Thorborg, me, or any other busy and successful physical therapist your business card and say you’d like us to mentor you…don’t expect a phone call. Reach out, have specific questions, initiate regular conversation, PUT IN THE WORK.

Being a professional is an honor and a blessing, but it is also challenging. If you are seeking happiness in a career as a sports physical therapist, take care of yourself and truly understand what that means in this season of life, and actively seek mentorship. Remember the two things you have control over are your attitude and your effort.

Sincerely,

Ashley Campbell