Conflict at Work: The Conversation You're Avoiding (And How to Have It) Transcript

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Why difficult workplace conversations matter

Search heidehealth. com. Welcome to the Burnout Recovery Podcast, a guiding resource dedicated to healthcare professionals on their journey to overcoming burnout.

Spearheaded by Dr. Joe Brain, certified professional coach and rehabilitation physician. Hello and welcome back to the Burnout Recovery podcast. I'm Dr.

Jo Braid, your host, medical doctor of over 20 years and expert in burnout recovery and healthcare wellbeing. Today we're tackling something that keeps so many of us awake at night, that difficult conversation you've been putting off at work.

you know the one I'm talking about. Maybe it's with a colleague who consistently dumps their workload on you, a manager who micromanages every decision, or a team member whose negativity is affecting everyone's morale.

Over the next 12 minutes, we're going to explore why avoiding these conversations actually fuels our burnout, and I'll give you a practical framework to approach them with confidence and compassion.

About three years ago, I was working with a registrar, let's call her Amy, who came to me absolutely exhausted. She was work 60 plus hour weeks. she was constantly stressed and on the verge of leaving medicine altogether.

When we dug deeper, it wasn't just the workload. Amy had a consultant who would regularly change protocols at the last minute, criticise her decisions in front of patients, and then act as if nothing had happened.

Amy kept telling herself, we just need to work harder, or maybe I'm being too sensitive. Does this sound familiar to you? Amy spent months avoiding the conversation, hoping things would improve.

And instead, she developed insomnia, started having panic attacks before shifts, and her confidence plummeted.

The cost of avoidance and the evidence

The avoidance was not protecting her, it was slowly destroying her professional identity and wellbeing. And I see this pattern often in my coaching practice.

Healthcare professionals who are incredibly skilled at having difficult conversations with patients and with their families. But when it comes to workplace conflict with colleagues, we freeze.

We tell ourselves we're being professional by staying quiet, but really we are often being a professional martyrs. The truth is that conversation you're avoiding, it's not going away.

And every day you don't have it, It is taking up mental real estate, draining your energy and contributing to burnout. The conflict isn't the problem, the avoidance is.

Research from the Harvard Business Review shows that workplace conflict avoidance costs organizations billions annually in lost productivity. But more importantly for us, it is devastating for individual well-being.

A 2023 study in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology found that healthcare workers who avoided addressing workplace conflicts were 40% more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

This is two of the key components of burnout. Here's what's fascinating. The same study found that those who engaged in constructive conflict resolution actually reported higher job satisfaction and better team relationships.

the keyword there is constructive. You may be across Dr Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety. This shows us that high performing teams are not conflict free.

The CLEAR framework for tough conversations

They're teams where people feel safe to address problems directly and respectfully. In healthcare, where lives are literally on the line, this becomes even more critical.

And the neuroscience backs this up too. When we avoid difficult conversations, our brains interpret this as an ongoing threat. Our stress response system stays activated, flooding us with cortisol and adrenaline.

This chronic activation is exhausting and directly contributes to burnout symptoms. Conversely, when we address conflicts constructively, we activate our prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain responsible for problem solving and emotional regulation.

We literally think more clearly and feel more in control. So let's get practical. I'm going to give you my clear framework for having these difficult conversations plus some specific scripts you can adapt.

Okay, for the first letter, C, choose your timing and setting. Don't ambush somebody in a corridor or right before a procedure. Request a private meeting.

I'd like to discuss something important with you. When would be a good time for a 15-minute conversation? Lead with intention, not accusation. By value our working relationship and want to address something so we can work together more effectively.

E. Express the specific behaviour and its impact. Use facts, not interpretations. So when protocols are changed without notice, I find myself unprepared for patients, which affects my confidence and potentially patient care.

A. Ask for their perspective. I'm wondering if you're aware of this pattern and I'd love to hear your perspective? This is where it's not about being right.

It's about understanding. And R. Request specific change and agree on next steps. Going forward, could we establish a system where protocol changes are communicated 24 hours in advance where possible?

So this can tie in with like rostering changes or clinic changes. You know, you need ideally to have that adequate lead in time so you can know where you're meant to be, who you meant be responsible for, and who are you going to see on that day.

So here's some specific scripts for the colleague who consistently arrives late to handover. I've noticed handover is starting 10 to 15 minutes late recently.

Example scripts and practical applications

When this happens, I'm either late for my next commitment or miss important patient information. I wondering if there's something I can do to help ensure we start on time.

And secondly, for the manager who micromanages, they appreciate your attention to detail and want to make sure I meeting your expectations. I've noticed you're checking in on tasks quite frequently.

I'm wondering, are there specific areas where you need more confidence in my abilities so we can address these directly? So again, this isn't about winning or being right.

It's about creating a sustainable working environment where can thrive, not just survive. So here's what I invite you to do this week. Think about that one conversation you've been avoiding.

You know which one it is. It probably came to mind in the first few minutes of this episode. Ask yourself these reflection questions. What am I afraid will happen if I have this conversation?

What's already happening because I'm not having it? And what's the smallest version of this conversion I could start with? That ties in with last week's episode, the 1% rule, just getting started with something really, really small.

And your action step is simple, but not easy. So schedule that conversation within the next seven days, not necessarily not to necessarily have it, but at least to schedule it.

Put it in your calendar. Send that message requesting a meeting time.

Weekly challenge and closing remarks

And remember, here you're not just advocating for yourself, you are modelling healthy communication for your entire team. When we address conflicts constructively, we create psychological safety for everyone.

And here's my challenge for you. After you have that conversation, share how it went with one other person. It could be a trusted colleague, a friend, or if this is something you want ongoing support with, consider joining the wait list for coaching with me.

and this is a space where we can work through these exact scenarios together. That difficult conversation you're avoiding isn't going to get easier with time, but you are going get stronger, more skilled and more confident with practice.

Until next week, take care of yourself with the same compassion you show your patients. This is Dr. Jo Braid and I'll see you next time on the Burnout Recovery Podcast.

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Links are in the show notes. Your wellbeing matters. Protect the asset that is you. You know those moments where you're between patients, everything's moving fast and you just want to double-check something without falling down a rabbit hole?

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