

About this book

“The biggest challenge we face in the future of healthcare is the health of our healthcare professionals. If they are in good shape, they can provide the best possible care to their patients. It is this unique relationship between patient and care provider that must remain central to healthcare. This book identifies the most important condition for this: the genuine, heartfelt attention to your own needs that is the essence of self-compassion. This will have to be the basis for keeping healthcare healthy in the future, even if we healthcare professionals are not much used to it yet!”

- *Carina Hilders, gynecologist, chairperson of the board of the Reinier de Graaf hospital in Delft, extraordinary professor of Medical Management and Leadership, Erasmus University, Rotterdam*

“Taking good care of yourself, and being kind and compassionate toward yourself turn out to be quite a job for many doctors, and one that they do not always manage. We know from research that you can cope with your work for longer, provide better care, and enjoy life more if you also learn to take good care of yourself, and not just materially. But knowing something is not the same as doing it. After an extensive theoretical introduction, the workbook section of *Heart for the Doctor* offers much food for thought and exercises for developing more compassion for oneself and thus being able to continue to practice medicine with pleasure and dedication in today’s frenzied society.”

- *Henriette van der Horst, general practitioner, emeritus professor of family medicine, Amsterdam University Medical Center*

“I wish this book had come out ten or twenty years earlier, because throughout these years, I talked to so many doctors whose aspiration to help people has foundered on the demands of the healthcare system. They had lost their drive and were suffering from heartache. *Heart for the Doctor* offers such doctors a way out. The book contains not only deep insights about mindfulness and self-compassion, but also practical tools that doctors can use to enhance their professional lives. This can help them be ready for each new patient with clarity of mind and an open heart – two necessary ingredients for a healing relationship. Written with a light touch, yet to the point and substantiated with research and professional experience, I highly recommend this book for every doctor.”

- *Rob Brandsma, psychologist and mindfulness teacher, author of The Mindfulness Teaching Guide*

“Medical practitioners often find themselves balancing many (and often conflicting) demands in their professional and personal lives. A growing body of evidence indicates that self-compassion is not soft, self-indulgent, self-centred, or a luxury, but a vital necessity which fosters mental and emotional strength, reduces stress, and encourages self-care practices. Cultivating self-compassion not only enhances our personal well-being but also positively impacts on the ability to deliver the best possible care to our patients. I can highly recommend *Heart for the doctor; working with self-compassion* which combines evidence-based foundation with practical exercises, specifically tailored for doctors.”

- Dr Ira van der Steenstraten, President Queensland Medical Women's Society, Vice President Doctors' Health in Queensland. Facilitator and co-developer of the AMAQ 'Well-being at Work' program for (junior) doctors.

“It's common knowledge that doctors don't need sleep or lunch and never get tired. That this myth produces poor care and burned-out doctors is clearly illustrated and supported by scientific facts in this down-to-earth book. Fortunately, there is an alternative. The second part of this book explains the meaning of self-compassion and, more importantly, how to put it into practice. The goal is for doctors to lead balanced lives and be able to deliver better care. Both authors have a wealth of relevant experience and have produced a book that should be required reading for every doctor!”

- Bart Timmers, general practitioner and teacher

“This is a masterpiece of a book. The authors capture the unique culture of medicine and how the profession affects a physician's body, mind, and spirit. An excellent resource for any physician looking to improve their caring for their patients and themselves.”

- Paula Gardiner, adjunct associate professor of family medicine, Boston University, USA

“*Heart for the Doctor* meets an urgent need. Doctors know that they should take care of themselves but often realize it too late, with serious consequences. Self-compassion is a necessity, not a luxury. I believe it can increase job satisfaction and happiness and, in the long run, prevent absences due to illness. Not only that: it can also prompt one to make the right choices and to call a halt in time when things are going in the wrong direction. Ultimately, this benefits patient care. I can therefore recommend *Heart for the Doctor* with all my heart!”

- Tristan van Doormaal, neurosurgeon and associate professor University Medical Center Utrecht

“From hard work to heart work! A highly practical hands-on book for doctors: a book for you. Take heart – help is at hand.”

- Remke van Staveren, psychiatrist, author of *Hart voor de GGZ*

Heart for the Doctor

Working with self-compassion

Marga Gooren and Mila de Koning

Warden Press

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We are deeply honored that the foreword to this book was written by Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff, founders of the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSCM) program.

Foreword

It is a pleasure to write a foreword to this delightful, well-researched, and timely book. Self-compassion is quickly going mainstream, mainly due to the burgeoning scientific evidence that supports it, and this book skillfully customizes self-compassion for physicians and other medical professionals. The authors, Marga Gooren and Mila de Koning, are a former general practice physician and a former nurse/social worker, respectively. They have been teaching self-care in medical education for many years and have personally witnessed the transformative power of self-compassion in their professional and personal lives.

In 2016, the Physician Wellness Committee at the Stanford University School of Medicine conducted a survey and concluded that self-compassion was the strongest personal resilience factor that protected doctors against burnout. Unfortunately, as the authors of this book point out, the demands of medical practice leave little room for self-compassion. For example, it is human instinct to pay more attention to the needs of others when their lives are in danger. It is also difficult for doctors to keep an open heart when they are surrounded by suffering, yet the system demands greater efficiency and blames the doctor when things go wrong. The cards are clearly stacked against the doctor. Doctors are also not supposed to suffer from stress or get sick, as humans tend to do.

This is a deeply compassionate book, with more than a little humor added. Simply reading it, without even taking the time to practice the exercises, will allow doctors to breathe more easily and start to take care of themselves. The authors know the territory. They explore why physicians get into medicine in the first place, the conditions in which physicians work, and the impact of those conditions on a doctor's well-being. Then the authors make the case for self-compassion, showing doctors how to be more self-compassionate without adding to their workload. Remember: If it's a struggle, it's not self-compassion! Self-compassion is about letting go of unnecessary stress and allowing ourselves to be more fully human. And this can be learned by anybody.

Fortunately, as the research shows, becoming more self-compassionate usually means that we become *less* selfish, *more* motivated, *less* self-critical, and *more* emotionally resilient. The evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that self-compassion is good for us: Self-compassion is strongly associated with positive emotional well-being; lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression; more resilient coping with life's challenges; healthy habits such as diet and exercise; and more satisfying relationships. It is also an unusually effective antidote to shame, and it protects clinicians from caregiver fatigue and burnout.

Self-compassion is a simple U-turn – when things go wrong, we give ourselves the same kindness and understanding as we might give to a dear friend. This can be a revelation, and it's as easy as asking yourself, "What do I need right now?" This book is full of information to help you decide if self-compassion is for you. If you decide to make self-compassion a habit, it shows you how with quick, simple exercises

Most of the practices contained in the book are based on the empirically supported, 8-week *Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC)* program. They have been skillfully adapted and sequenced to meet the needs of busy medical professionals. We are most grateful to the authors, both of whom are talented, highly trained MSC teachers, for all the hard work they put into making the lives of their medical colleagues easier.

Following your curiosity about this subject is already an act of self-compassion – a sign that you are on your way. We hope you have a chance to read further, try out some of the practices, and enjoy the myriad benefits of self-compassion. It may just change your life.

The making of *Heart for the Doctor*

Our collaboration started in April 2014 when we both participated in the first Mindful Self-Compassion course in the Netherlands – a program developed by the pioneers in this field, Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff. We met there and found that we shared a “heart for healthcare.” Our personal experiences of working in healthcare had led us both to shift the scope of our work from the patient to the healthcare professional. Marga had worked as a family physician for ten years before starting her own coaching practice in 2010. She has since coached many doctors in the areas of job satisfaction, resilience, and self-care. Mila had worked for many years in various positions in the mental health sector before switching in 2009 to providing courses for doctors and other healthcare professionals who were weighed down by the stress and heavy workloads, and were looking for a more balanced way of life.

We soon decided to join forces and combine our enthusiasm, knowledge, and skills. Since then, we have run many programs, using the tools we learned from Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer. In May 2017, we were the first to conduct an accredited Mindful Self-Compassion course specifically for physicians. This proved to be a fruitful collaboration, which eventually led to this book!

Heart for the Doctor could not have been written without the work of Dr. Kristin Neff, professor of Human Development and Culture at the University of Texas, and Dr. Christopher Germer, psychotherapist and lecturer at Harvard Medical School. Through them, we have both been personally touched by the effect of self-compassion on our lives. Their pioneering research and work on self-compassion is invaluable. They successfully channeled the available scientific knowledge on the components and effects of self-compassion into practically applicable techniques and exercises for everyday life. The program they developed gave impetus to a worldwide self-compassion movement. The Center for Mindful Self-Compassion in San Diego was established to meet the demand for courses and training teachers. Currently, Mindful Self-Compassion training is delivered in over thirty countries around the world. The work of Christopher and Kristin is the foundation of this book: we couldn’t have written it without them.

Mila: Self-compassion has taught me that sometimes the inner critic is not an easily detected harsh, critical voice but a more devious doubtful, undermining voice that says, “Should you be doing that?” or “Are you so sure about that?”

Self-compassion has put me in touch with a deep well within me that says, “You’re already good enough,” enabling me to stand up for myself in difficult situations. It has made me aware of what is truly important to me and has supported me in taking steps that have been crucial to my happiness.

Marga: Self-compassion has helped me to be there for myself in difficult times and to dare to follow my own path more and more. The fact that my husband and I were not able to have children was one of the hardest things to accept in my life and yet it was the beginning of some extraordinary discoveries and new adventures. Through self-compassion, I gained the courage to quit my job as a family physician, to start a practice as a coach, to run workshops and trainings, and give presentations. I have become much less afraid of failure. Self-compassion has also empowered me to do what makes me happiest and to give the best of myself.

Of course, there are other elements in both our lives and careers that have helped us write this book. We have been inspired by many others before us who have researched the effects of self-compassion, have written fascinating books on the subject, and from whom we have learned much. We have gratefully drawn on the knowledge and experience we gained from them and have added insights from our own work experience in healthcare and in training and coaching physicians and other healthcare professionals. It would be impossible to name everyone who has inspired and motivated us on our path. Nevertheless, we do wish to personally thank some of them here.

Mila: First, I would like to thank Rob Brandsma, the colleague with whom I took many steps on the teacher path and from whom I learned a lot. Thanks to Rob, and together with him, I had the opportunity to teach and to train teachers with Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff. I also wish to thank Christopher Germer for his valuable lessons and his belief in me. Last, but not least, this book really wouldn’t have come to be if it weren’t for Christine Braehler, with whom Marga and I took the Mindful Self-Compassion course. I went on to conduct many courses together with Christine, whose way of teaching has inspired me enormously. And it was she who planted the seed for this book and kept watering it until I had enough confidence to take the next step.

I wish to thank Marga for our great collaboration. It is rare to find someone you can work with so easily. From our very first workshop, our work has been a process of effortless cooperation. We complement each other well, and together we are strong. Writing this book went just as smoothly. I am very happy that Marga consented wholeheartedly when I told her that we had to write a book together.

That's typical of our partnership. We throw ourselves into it, first with the heart and then with the rest of ourselves. And it always turns out well!

Marga: I too would also like to thank a number of people personally. Lizelotte Wijn and Cassi Christiansen, both coaches, showed me at different times in my life that I have choices and may make them myself. Robert Dilts, Tim Hallbom, and Suzi Smith, all NLP developers, coaches, and trainers, who are such inspiring examples as compassionate coaches and from whom I have learned so much. My teammates at Compassion for Care, who also have so much heart for healthcare and have supported me in writing this book. And, of course, Christine Braehler, who planted the seed for this book.

And I would like to thank Mila for our special cooperation. Effortless is the right word, in spite of our very different personalities. We manage to forge and execute plans in a short period of time. We are also good at eating and drinking together and having loads of fun. Now that the book is finished, we should go ahead and arrange our first self-compassion retreat on Ibiza.

Finally, we would both like to express our great appreciation to numerous doctors. Thank you to all the doctors in our self-compassion courses who decided to do something good for themselves and took time out to try something new. We learned a great deal from them. Thank you to all the doctors who had the courage to share their personal stories and struggles with us, making our common humanity visible and tangible. And thank you to the physicians who were willing to spend some of their scarce and precious time reading this book and sharing their valuable comments, encouragement, and enthusiasm with us. You know who you are!

The road to this book was a fruitful journey for us. We hope that reading it will be the same for you.

Introduction

Doctors love their profession. Between 70 and 80 percent of all doctors are highly satisfied with their careers, and are especially energized by the personal connection they form with patients, and their ability to offer support and guidance. They get tremendous satisfaction out of having a positive impact on someone else's life, and being able to make a real difference.¹⁻⁷

However, there is always what the *New York Times* called “the widespread problem of doctor burnout” to consider. Newspapers and professional journals are full of disturbing stories about doctors who are overworked and burned out. A sample of the headlines: “Healthcare systems cause rampant burnout among doctors and nurses;” “Distressed doctors don't bend, so they break;” “Panic, chronic anxiety, and burnout take doctors to breaking point”.⁸⁻¹¹ These headlines are from before the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² The situation has only worsened since then.

We too have noticed the problem in our work with physicians. We see a lot of doctors with young families who have difficulty finding a healthy work-life balance; doctors who struggle with increasing workloads and senseless bureaucratic demands; doctors in training who struggle to meet all the requirements and make the right choices; and older doctors who find it increasingly tough to do evening and night shifts.

This bothers us.

It bothers us on several counts, starting with its impact on doctors. At best, they enjoy life less; at worst, they run out of steam or fall ill. But their patients, colleagues, and families are affected too. Doctors are not at home much, or if they are, they have to work at home and have a short fuse – at home and sometimes in the dealings with patients too. Overworked doctors pay less attention, make more mistakes, and lose connection with the patient.

Burnout among healthcare professionals is a growing problem worldwide. Studies in the US prior to the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that between 35 and 45 percent of clinicians suffer from serious occupational burnout.^{12,13} The main causes of burnout are usually heavy workloads and a lack of autonomy, and that certainly applies to physicians. The demand for healthcare is increasing every year, and healthcare is becoming more complex. Patients are more knowledgeable and articulate, and they demand more of their doctors. There is increasing

interference from the government, insurers, and from non-medical management, all generating new production demands and bureaucracy. These trends are more widespread, but what is unique to doctors is that any interaction or decision is potentially a life-or-death situation. The pressure on doctors is often extreme and they experience severe stress. Fortunately, not everyone gets burnt out, but those who do could be seen as the canary in the coal mine, warning us of a toxic work environment.¹⁴

Resolving the problems with that work environment is beyond the scope of this book, although we do describe the role of a physician's organization and workplace in the development of stress and burnout. Our primary concern here is with doctors themselves, and their coping strategies. As a doctor, how do you stay afloat in this busy, demanding environment? How can you continue to enjoy your job? How do you maintain the energy to do fun things outside of work? How can you be the best doctor you can be? How do you help your patients with dedication and effectiveness? After all, that is what made you want to become a doctor. Self-compassion is a powerful tool in this regard. Self-compassion simply means treating yourself with care and kindness, just as you would a good friend. It has helped us tremendously in our personal lives, including in the writing of this book! We also see the effects of self-compassion on doctors in our practice every day. But, importantly for the readers of this book, the evidence is not just anecdotal: the effects of self-compassion on physician well-being have been scientifically demonstrated. Self-compassion appears to be particularly effective for coping with the external and internal factors that cause stress in physicians. And we believe that if a majority of physicians work with self-compassion, they will be able to make positive changes to the external stressors within the healthcare system. Self-compassion not only helps you cope but also gives you the courage and energy to make a real difference.

Just as some people are naturally loud or quiet, extroverted or introverted, some are compassionate toward themselves, while others are self-critical. However, the following applies to everyone irrespective of their basic nature: everyone can learn how to be self-compassionate. Most doctors are highly responsible and self-critical by nature. If you are a doctor, no doubt you are dedicated to your job of taking care of others. For years you have studied hard, worked hard, and put other things aside for the sake of making people better. However, in the process, have you paused to wonder how you are doing yourself? To take care of another, you first have to take care of yourself. You cannot pour from an empty jug. Or, as you are told when traveling by plane, you must first put on your own oxygen mask before you can help someone else.

But you may not have learned how to do this. Although your profession requires you to take care of others on a daily basis, your training didn't teach you how to take good care of yourself, nor how to deal with the pain, sadness, fear, and even trauma induced by things you face. On the contrary, the message that is drummed into you is that you must be strong, must steel yourself against emotions, and must weather all storms.

Self-compassion teaches you to be gentler with yourself, not to set the bar too high; to cope more effectively with difficult emotions and relationships; to be aware of your own needs and to set boundaries; and to make choices that give you pleasure and satisfaction. Most of all, it teaches you to celebrate life. Skills and strengths that are helpful not only for doctors who are stressed or burned out, but for every doctor! It is a tough profession even if that's not obvious to others – or even to yourself. The pain and suffering you witness do not leave you cold. And no healthcare professional escapes the external pressures of the constant changes in the sector. Self-compassion equips you to cope in a healthy way.

We have written this book, then, for *all* doctors.

Reader's guide

The book is in two parts. In Part 1, Marga guides the reader through the theory and the science of self-compassion. In Part 2, Mila describes the practice of self-compassion, with exercises to get you started. Depending on your learning style, you can always skip the theoretical section and start with the self-compassion exercises right away. However, a lot of doctors like to start with some theoretical, scientific background first, so that's an option too.

Perhaps you have never heard of self-compassion, and this is your first introduction to the subject. Or maybe you have heard or read about it, and your curiosity is piqued. Perhaps you have already undergone mindfulness or self-compassion training and are looking for a refresher course. Whether you are a beginner or an advanced learner, this book will give you the tools to get started or to keep going with the practice of self-compassion.

In Chapter 1, we consider the environment in which physicians work and the personal characteristics that many physicians share. What makes medical practice such a marvelous profession, and what makes it nevertheless such a struggle for many doctors? What is the impact of their level of well-being on doctors and on their patients? What effect do these factors have on the quality of care and of the healthcare system? And what's the best way of dealing with all this?

In Chapter 2, we discuss the science of self-compassion. What is it, and what is it not? What is the working mechanism underlying self-compassion, and what are the effects of self-compassion and self-compassion training? Why does it work so well for physicians?

In Part 2 of the book, you literally set to work with self-compassion. Chapter 3 introduces you the practice of self-compassion. With the help of various visualization, meditation, and reflection exercises, you can experience the effect of self-compassion. You will learn to consciously apply self-compassion in your daily life.

In Chapter 4, this is taken a step further. You will practice using self-compassion in your relationship with yourself and with others. It will enable you to motivate yourself in a friendly and effective way. It will help you deal with moments when you experience distressing feelings, such as feeling rejected or hurt by people close to you. Self-compassion won't wave a magic wand to create a new life without troubling feelings. But it will support and encourage you in this life, complicated and demanding as it can be.

In Chapter 5, you learn to get in touch with what really makes you happy. You start working with what matters to you, what you are grateful for, and what makes you tick. You learn to appreciate yourself.

In conclusion

Self-compassion is not a quick fix. Reading this book is not going to solve all your problems and allow you to go through life without any difficulties. Self-compassion is a step-by-step process. You will, however, notice an effect right from the start. If you can be a little kinder to yourself in difficult moments, realize that you are not the only one struggling, and decide to do something good for yourself, your day can suddenly look very different. Or, as Christopher Germer says:

“One moment of self-compassion can change your whole day. A string of those moments can change your entire life.”

We hope you will enjoy reading this book, and we hope it inspires you to start working with self-compassion!

Marga and Mila

Part 1 Background

1 Why is it so tough to be a doctor?



Before we can understand why life can be such a struggle for doctors, it is important to know what makes them want to be doctors in the first place.

1.1 Why do doctors become doctors?

“The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.”

William Osler (1963)¹⁵

“A giver in human exchange gets a lot from giving.”

F. Riessman (1965)¹⁶

When I ask doctors why they became doctors, they usually answer in a slightly embarrassed tone: “To help people.” They feel it sounds like such a cliché, but this really is what drives them.

Doctors get great satisfaction from their profession because they feel they can make a real difference to people, albeit sometimes a small one.

What really appealed to me was that you can help to make people happier. Not so much to make them better. And that it really matters, what you do. That by doing something small, which is super-essential to them, you can make a substantial difference in their lives.

F. Emergency Physician

I enjoy helping people move forward in their lives. In my profession, I don't need much, just myself. I like the fact that I can be instrumental in helping patients get back on their feet without needing lab tests or things like that. It's important to me to contribute to society like this and to do something meaningful.

L. Psychiatrist

Some doctors have parents or other family members in the medical profession and are inspired by them to become doctors.

My father was a family physician with a surgery next-door to our house. I became increasingly curious about what went on behind that door. I never seriously considered anything else. It was clear to me that this was what I wanted too.

D. Family Physician

Doctors diagnose their patients and help them to recover from illness or to cope with their limitations. They assist people in their most vulnerable and intimate moments, witnessing births, illnesses, and deaths. They use their medical and human knowledge and skills to improve the lives of their patients. They are often first on the scene in the dramas of human life and regularly ensure that a particular drama ends well.¹⁷ What they value most is the intense contact, the deep connection with people in both beautiful and difficult moments. Just their presence as a human being seems to be tremendously helpful.¹⁸

The best part is the contact with people: there is a connection, not just between doctor and patient, but also between two people. The problem may not be solved immediately, but you do notice that it has become lighter.

Y. GP

The best moment is when patients feel comfortable with me, feel they have been truly understood, and trust me. This is why I am a doctor: this is who I want to be.

W. Gynecologist

Doctors live full lives and hear a lot of people's personal stories. This gives them deep insight into human existence, which many doctors experience as a unique form of personal growth and development. It makes them feel like wiser and better humans.¹⁷

You see people as they really are. You can get straight to the heart of someone who opens up in this way. It makes them vulnerable, but also touching.

F. Emergency Physician

Sometimes the decision to go into medicine can be triggered by personal experience of their own illness or that of someone close to them. I (Marga) decided to become a doctor at the age of eleven, when I landed in hospital with acute perforated appendicitis. Although I was quite ill, everything that happened there in the hospital fascinated me. I had found what I wanted to do when I grew up.

A big factor in my decision to become a doctor was that my grandfather had bowel cancer; he had to have surgery and a stoma. A few years later my grandmother was in intensive care. I found it all very interesting; I wanted to learn more about it.

S. Surgeon

My parents are both family physicians. I didn't really want to be a doctor at all. But during a crafts class I cut my finger and there was so much tissue damage that surgery was necessary. The surgeon was very considerate. He explained what he was doing and there was nice music playing. It was such a pleasant atmosphere, and I felt so cared for. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I realized, "I really want to do this too." The chance to do something for other people that makes them feel good and safe attracted me to the profession.

Y. Family Physician

Besides the profound emotional appeal of the medical profession, there is also the intellectual challenge and stimulation it offers. Doctors find it energizing and enjoyable to explore the mysteries of the human body and mind.

I was always very interested in what makes people tick, not just physically, but also emotionally, and how they think and make life decisions.

M. Internist

The technical side of the job appeals to many doctors too: they get a kick out of the challenge of performing a complex procedure or operation.


I like urology because you get to do a lot of surgical work. I like the delicate work of reconstructive surgery, fixing something, not destroying something.
T. Urologist

The complex nature of a physician's profession and the ever-accelerating advances in science and innovation in the field call for lifelong learning, which is something many ambitious physicians enjoy. They approach the diagnosis of a cluster of symptoms like a complicated puzzle that must be solved, and they get enormous satisfaction out of doing so successfully.

I like solving difficult puzzles. Finding out what is going on, especially when it is complicated. Seeing what I can offer, and finding a solution. Preferably together with the patient.
B. Geriatrics Specialist

Last but not least, a medical career offers weighty responsibilities, a sense of autonomy, freedom, and independence, and plenty of variety.

I like the variety, the unpredictability. You never really know how a conversation will go. Not even if you've seen someone ten times before. People are unpredictable.
L. Psychiatrist

 Why did you decide to become a doctor?

1.2 Why do doctors struggle?

"Doctors are human beings.

This has not been studied in clinical trials, but [it] is generally assumed to be true."

Peterkin (2017)¹⁹

During my first phone call with Marjan, she stumbles over her words in her rush to tell me her story. She has been a family physician for eighteen years now and

has always been very enthusiastic and energetic. She comes from a family of doctors and has never wanted to do anything but help and treat people. After working in tropical medicine for two years, she started her own solo practice, which she has since transformed into a well-run group practice. She has put a lot of time and energy into the practice. She rattles off a list of the work she does on top of her full-time job: she is chair of the regional family doctors' group, medical advisor to the local hospice, and on a committee for promoting contact between family doctors and medical specialists. She is married with three children, and leads, in her own words, a "very good" life. The hard work suits her. Yet the stress and tension at the other end of the line is palpable.

Marjan has seen the healthcare system change dramatically in recent years, and has found that difficult. Many tasks have been moved from the hospital to the family practice. There are new practice assistants and doctors' assistants, but the amount of administration has increased out of all proportion, at the expense of time and attention for the patient. She can get terribly worked up about the interference of insurance companies and the endless quibbling about money. A year or two ago it all got a bit too much for her, and she gave up a number of managerial tasks. She found herself becoming too emotionally involved and setting the bar too high for herself and others – all too often at the expense of good patient care. She tried hiring a locum doctor for one day a week, but that didn't quite work out. She likes to keep her finger on the pulse, literally and metaphorically, and she couldn't take a back seat where "her" patients were concerned. Moreover, all questions eventually came back to her. So, she just soldiered on. It starts to calm down at the other end of the line. Marjan wonders out loud if she can go on like this. The changes in the healthcare system are bothering her more and more; she feels that she can't see the wood for the trees anymore. She notices that she is increasingly impatient with her patients and gets irritated when they don't follow her instructions. Communication is not going well. And now she has been given a bad review on a review website, which is upsetting her more than she would have expected.

That Marjan is not the only doctor who is struggling like this is clear. The newspapers and professional journals are full of stories about doctors having burnouts, and more and more research is being done on the subject. The annual Dutch National Survey of Working Conditions shows that the perceived workload of physicians is twice as high as the national average.²⁰ Nearly 18 percent suffer from burnout symptoms, compared to 14.6 percent in the general population. In a survey by the LHV (Dutch Family Physician Association) among 1,603 general practitioners, 62 percent of the participants stated that the workload was too high and that they have reached the limit in terms of workload.²¹ Almost 39