

An interview with Alison Coughlan

Alison Coughlan is an author and resilience-at-work coach, and a keynote speaker at ASMIRT 2022. Ahead of the conference in May, we asked Alison what is in store for conference attendees and to provide some helpful, practical strategies as we navigate these challenging times.

Can you tell us about your professional background?

I have a research and public health background and work as a speaker, author, resilience at work coach and facilitator, to build the capabilities of individuals and teams in the health and social sectors. My work is informed by almost 30 years' experience working at a state, national and global level. It also, importantly, draws on my personal experience of reaching, sustaining and recovering from burnout, after which I charted a new, more fulfilling and sustainable path for my work and my life. I published my first book about what I learnt on my path to recovery in 2021. It's called *The Health Hazard: Take control, restore wellbeing and optimise impact* and is designed as a practical guide to maintaining and growing wellbeing at work.



You have a lot of experience working with organisations such as BreastScreen Victoria, Victorian Cancer Agency Ministerial Advisory Council, Ovarian Cancer Australia and the World Ovarian Cancer Coalition. How do you feel these roles have contributed to your understanding and insight of the challenges experienced by healthcare practitioners working at the coalface?

In these leadership roles and in my consultancy work, I have had the privilege of working with many people from different clinical and non-clinical disciplines across almost 80 organisations. This has provided me with first-hand experience and insight into the many challenges faced by others and that I have faced into myself as a leader. The relentless demand, constrained resources, unmet needs and traumatic and distressing situations to name a few. There is always more to do and to be and, all the while, we might be running on empty and our health and wellbeing may be on the decline. If we also have a workplace culture that is unsupportive, this can become quite the perfect storm.

Excitement is building for the ASMIRT 2022 Conference, in which you are a workshop facilitator an invited keynote speaker. Will you be covering the same content, or should delegates attend both?

I too am excited at the prospect of this meeting having attended conferences online in the past two years. I have missed the energy

of the collective and also the meaningful connections that occur through meeting new people and reconnecting with colleagues I haven't seen for a long time.

I would recommend attending both as they have a different focus. The keynote address will take a systems' view and look at the case for change, the nature of change we need in culture, norms, beliefs and actions throughout all levels of our health system and the call to action for leaders, teams and individuals in transforming wellbeing and resilience at work for all. In the workshop we will focus purely on the individual and create a unique plan to shift from surviving to thriving at work.

What can conference attendees expect from your workshop, *The Health Hazard: Take control, restore wellbeing and optimise impact*?

In the half-day workshop, the focus is on each attendee developing their completely unique and very powerful personal impact plan. The workshop will include a mix of thought-starter presentations, guidance through a set of activities and reflections and discussions about key issues emerging. The three components of the workshop are: Developing insight to help prioritise action; Creating an enabling and empowered mindset; and Identifying mechanisms to build energy and wellbeing reserves. Each participant will come away with their Plan and a set of actions to start them on an easier path ahead to greater impact, meaning and satisfaction while maintaining wellbeing at work.

Burnout and resilience in health care has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Do you have any tips and practical strategies to assist medical radiation practitioners in this challenging environment?

My top tips are:

1. Take control of what you can and let go of what you can not.
2. Don't wait for someone to rescue you – come to your own rescue.
3. Recognise that you matter and putting yourself first may in fact be the only way you can optimise your capacity to serve others through your work and in your life.
4. Prioritise your wellbeing – make conscious choices to actively replenish your energy and wellbeing reserves and to prevent drains on your wellbeing wherever possible.
5. Create a plan to keep you focussed and on track with clear goals, feasible actions and regular reviews.
6. Engage in conversations and action in your workplace and sector so we can work together to make our work environments healthier for all.

In your *From Burnout to Blazing a Trail* webinar, you explored the epidemic of burnout and implications for our work and personal lives. You also spoke about the need for fundamental shifts in our personal beliefs and workplace norms required to address this problem in a meaningful and sustainable way. What can practitioners do today to start this journey, to reject burnout and enact change in the workplace?

It starts with an open mind and a willingness to engage with the case for change and then a choice to be part of that change, regardless of your role. The current burnout crisis has been generations in the making and it is not going to be 'fixed' with simple strategies or tactics. We need to engage in conversations and action about the norms, beliefs, cultures and behaviours that got us to here and to co-create the workplace cultures, conditions and behaviours of today and tomorrow that will support us to maintain our resilience while doing great work. A good starting point is to attend the keynote presentation and register for my ASMIRT workshop!

conference.asmirt.org/2022