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By [Nancy Zywiec Waite](#)

Michelle Mudge-Riley felt trapped. Empty. Like a failure.

For years, she struggled with her career path as a practicing physician and wondered whether she made the right choice. Then she realized other doctors were experiencing similar feelings.

So Mudge-Riley, DO, MHA, decided to make a change. Instead of treating patients, she now helps other physicians. For the past 10 years, she's been a career and business development consultant, sharing her experiences, knowledge and insight with other doctors.

"As I figured out my own situation, I wrote about my struggles and other doctors started to find me and ask me for help," Mudge-Riley said. "It's very, very hard to figure this out and do it by yourself."

It was a bold move for someone whose lifelong dream was to practice medicine. When Mudge-Riley was in the fourth grade, she told her father that she wanted to be a doctor and "never looked back." She loved reading anything and everything related to doctors or medicine.

She went on to earn her medical degree from Des Moines University Osteopathic Medical School and her master's degree in health administration from Virginia Commonwealth University. She completed a medical internship and a business residency at Virginia Commonwealth University Hospital System (VCUHS).



**Michelle Mudge-Riley, DO, MHA**

But somehow with all of that education and training, she didn't feel a sense of accomplishment. She had no one to turn to for advice.

"It took me a long time to figure it out," she said.

Today, Mudge-Riley works directly with health care organizations and physicians at all levels, from doctors who have been in practice for 20 or more years to those right out of residency. She specializes in helping doctors change or fix their careers. She also works with doctors to lower or avoid burnout, run profitable practices and diversify their skill sets.

Through the phone, email and Skype, Mudge-Riley builds relationships with clients across the country. About 90 percent of her clients she has never met in person. "Doctors are busy people," she explained.

"They know themselves well," she said. "I help as a third party who's not only been there but who doesn't feel those paralyzing emotions that can confuse or sidetrack someone. Only peer-to-peer coaching can give another doctor that specific support and relief. Physician wellness is the ultimate goal."

Many of the doctors Mudge-Riley hears from describe feelings of frustration and isolation. She tries to reassure them they are not alone.

"I give them hope," she said. "These doctors thought they'd never feel that again. Call it burnout, call it unrest, call it anxiety, whatever. These doctors are feeling helpless and are in some sort of pain."

Mudge-Riley said she helps them get in control again, to "have a plan, be able to execute that plan and provide regular 'check-ups' with them for support and accountability. This enables someone to feel hope and healing, no matter what their age or degree of experience."

While each doctor is unique, there are usually some similarities in the situations her clients describe. She finds almost all of them have a sense of uncertainty. Questions she typically asks doctors who are re-evaluating their careers are:

- Why did you become a physician?
- In what areas do you have an interest?
- What special skills do you have?
- What kind of lifestyle do you want (work-life balance)?
- What financial needs do you have?

After doctors evaluate their own situation, Mudge-Riley can guide them through potential opportunities and help them understand their options. She also connects doctors through networking and shared resources. She does not tell doctors to leave medicine or forget about their medical training and experience. Ultimately, she helps them create and develop a career plan that fits their needs.

For newbies emerging from residency, she tells them to keep up with the latest trends, such as social media and health reform.

"Be aware of emerging delivery models of care like ACOs, patient centered medical homes and concierge medicine," she said. "Know the latest trends and decisions on reimbursement, quality measurement and technology. People are trying to figure this out and it will be a combination of forces but there will be a shift in medicine over the next decade and lots of opportunities to serve in a non-traditional way."

In the end, Mudge-Riley found her passion. And that's really all she wants for each doctor that she counsels.

"It's my job to give doctors hope and empower them," she said. "This is what I want to do. I want to help more doctors and health systems. There are so many people out there that feel out of place. I want to help them."

*Interested in learning more or talking to Dr. Mudge-Riley? Contact her at [mudgeriley@yahoo.com](mailto:mudgeriley@yahoo.com).*

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