



Battling Burnout Strategies for Promoting Physician Wellness

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Keywords

• Physician wellness • Burnout • Resilience • Self-care • Mindfulness meditation

Key points

- Burnout consists of 3 components: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.
- Individually-focused strategies for addressing burnout include mindfulness meditation, exercise, gratitude, healthy relationships with family/friends, and in some cases seeking mental health care.
- Organization-focused strategies include evaluating workload, autonomy, choice, and fairness.
- Emerging wellness research should better characterize the relative effectiveness of the 2 approaches and explore possible advantages of combining them into a holistic approach.

INTRODUCTION

Many physicians choose medicine to make a difference in the world, whether to help individuals, families, and communities, or to discover new medications and technologies. Medical training is challenging, but physicians look to the rewards that come after training and the opportunity to pursue their passion in the practice of medicine. Many trainees sacrifice their wellness during residency

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and fellowship with the idea that they will have a balanced life afterward, yet they have not been taught the necessary skills to accomplish this [1].

The changing face of medical training and health care has left physicians to confront unexpected stressors, notably debt. Medical school graduates have more debt than ever before when entering residency and sacrifice many years of higher earning potential to extended training. The average debt is between \$150,000 for public medical schools to as high as \$350,000 for private schools [2].

During residency and beyond, physicians battle insurance companies to get appropriate treatment and reimbursement for procedures needed by patients. Financial survival demands that they are meticulous in documentation and billing, yet reimbursements are decreasing [3,4]. In addition, severe physician and nurse shortages are causing an increased workload for many physicians [3]. The “meaningful use” requirements for electronic medical records have increased the clerical burden for physicians and increased burnout [5]. Although pediatricians compare favorably with other specialties in attitude toward electronic medical records, only 45% of general pediatricians and 35% of pediatric subspecialists are satisfied with the amount of clerical work involved with patient care [5].

Another stressor contributing to burnout is that physicians must grapple with a rapidly expanding body of medical knowledge to continue providing excellent health care. At the same time, they must meet the challenges of patients equipped with information from the internet and their preset framework of how medicine should be practiced. When this situation is combined with the assessment of patient satisfaction surveys, there is an exponential increase in the stress put on physicians to practice safe, evidence-based medicine [5]. With this increased, overwhelming burden, physicians are finding themselves disillusioned, stressed, and facing professional burnout.

With so many demands, it is difficult for physicians to reclaim their physical and mental health. Physicians often do not take care of themselves because their life has been dedicated to taking care of others. Twenty-five percent of physicians do not have a primary care provider, and many find it challenging to take time off to get the recommended health screenings, such as a colonoscopy [6]. There is a pervasive philosophy in medicine that “I should be able to handle things on my own,” leading to isolation and being overburdened, which leads to burnout [1]. Burnout contributes to increased rates of alcoholism, depression, loss of personal relationships, and suicide [3].

BURNOUT: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

Burnout is a syndrome consisting of 3 distinct components: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Table 1) [7–10]. This definition emerged from research in the United States from the 1970s and 1980s.

Exhaustion reflects the feeling of being overextended and depleted of physical and emotional resources. It may present as feelings of being worn out, debilitated, fatigued, and having low energy levels. Exhaustion can prompt

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