

How to beat burnout: 7 signs physicians should know

NOV 27, 2018

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If constant stress has you feeling exhausted, cynical or detached from patients, take notice. You may be in danger of physician burnout, which is more prevalent among doctors than other professionals. But how can you avoid it? Learn the signs and symptoms of physician burnout and what you can do to stay motivated on the job.

Committed to making physician burnout a thing of the past, the AMA has studied, and is currently addressing, issues causing and fueling physician burnout—including time constraints, technology and regulations—to better understand the challenges physicians face.

The AMA's STEPS Forward™ open-access platform offers innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment. Based on research and experience of expert physicians, the AMA offers CME that can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine, create a strong team culture, improve physician resiliency and prevent physician distress and suicide.

Mark Linzer, MD, director of the division of general internal medicine at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, has long studied physician burnout.

“Burnout doesn't have to be highly expensive to fix,” said Dr. Linzer, director of the HCMC Center for Patient and Provider Experience. “Preventing burnout can actually save money in the long run on recruiting and training new practice staff.”

Here are seven ways to know if your practice might be getting the best of you or a colleague—and that it is time to take action.

You have a high tolerance to stress. Stress consistently ranks as the primary predictor for burnout among physicians. “Please don't ignore the stress, even if you can take it,” Dr. Linzer said.

This is because, according to his research, physicians who consistently operate under high stress are at least 15 times more likely to burn out.

Your practice is exceptionally chaotic. A quick glance around your practice will let you know if you or your colleagues may cave to stress.

“People tend to think it’s the patients that always stress doctors out, but actually, it’s the opposite,” Dr. Linzer said. “Caring for patients keeps doctors motivated. What burns them out is caring for patients in a high-stress environment. Change the environment and you’ll change the overall quality of care.”

You don’t agree with your boss’ values or leadership. This one is particularly tricky to identify but is “necessary to prevent burnout,” said Dr. Linzer.

Whether physicians are at a large hospital or private practice, it is important for them to feel as if the people leading them also share their values for medicine and patient care. Otherwise, their motivation can slowly wane.

You’re the emotional buffer. Working with patients requires more than just medical expertise. “Often, the doctor acts as an emotional buffer,” Dr. Linzer said. “We will buffer the patient from our own stressful environment until we can’t take it anymore.”

Your job constantly interferes with family events. Spending quality time with loved ones helps physicians perform better.

“When they can’t do those things, it’s all they think about during the day and the patient suffers,” said Dr. Linzer. He cites work-life interference as one of the most common predictors for burnout among physicians in his studies.

You lack control over your work schedule and free time. When work demands increase, but control over your schedule does not, stress can kick in and spark burnout.

That is why Dr. Linzer often tells practices, “If you standardize, customize.” It is a medical mantra to suggest that if physicians must work long standardized sets of hours each week, practices should at least customize their schedules to flexibly fit changes or needs in their daily lives.

You don’t take care of yourself. When was the last time you enjoyed a nice bubble bath or morning run? If you continually neglect yourself, you may neglect your patients too.

“As physicians, we want to be altruistic, but one of the keys to altruism is self-care,” said Dr. Linzer.

STEPS Forward is features more than 50 modules that offer actionable, expert-driven strategies and

insights supported by practical resources and tools. Based on best practices from the field, STEPS Forward modules empower practices to identify areas or opportunities for improvement, set meaningful and achievable goals, and implement transformative changes designed to increase operational efficiencies, elevate clinical team engagement, and improve patient care.

Several modules have been developed from the generous grant funding of the federal Transforming Clinical Practices Initiative (TCPI), an effort designed to help clinicians achieve large-scale health transformation through TCPI's Practice Transformation Networks.

The AMA, in collaboration with TCPI, is providing technical assistance and peer-level support by way of STEPS Forward resources to enrolled practices. The AMA is also engaging the national physician community in health care transformation through network projects, change packages, success stories and training modules.