

# Physician burnout: It's not you, it's your medical specialty

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When thinking about becoming a physician, medical students might be interested in knowing which specialties can be considered the most stressful medical jobs.

More than 15,000 physicians from 29 specialties responded to a recent survey about burnout and depression.

The survey asked about the prevalence of burnout factors and how they affect physicians' lives. Overall, 42 percent of respondents were burned out—down from 51 percent last year—and 15 percent admitted to experiencing either clinical or colloquial forms of depression.

For the most stressful medical job, the highest percentages of burnout occurred among these medical specialties:

- Critical care: 48 percent.
- Neurology: 48 percent.
- Family medicine: 47 percent.
- Obstetrics and gynecology: 46 percent.
- Internal medicine: 46 percent.
- Emergency medicine: 45 percent.

Physicians in these medical specialties reported the lowest rates of burnout:

- Plastic surgery: 23 percent.
- Dermatology: 32 percent.
- Pathology: 32 percent.
- Ophthalmology: 33 percent.
- Orthopedics: 34 percent.

## What drives physician burnout

More than half of physicians chose “too many bureaucratic tasks” as the leading cause of burnout. However, physicians also designated spending too many hours at work, lack of respect, increased computerization of practice and insufficient compensation as top causes of burnout.

To reduce burnout, 31 percent would like a more manageable work schedule or call hours. And even though only 16 percent of respondents said that government regulations led to burnout, 27 percent said slashing government regulations would help cut their burnout.

Other elements that could alleviate burnout included:

- | Greater respect from patients: 12 percent.
- | More positive attitudes from colleagues: 8 percent.
- | Opportunities for education and professional growth: 8 percent.
- | More supportive spouse or partner: 5 percent.

When asked how they cope with burnout, half of respondents chose exercise, while 46 percent said they talk with their family or close friends, and 42 percent indicated that they slept. Unfortunately, though, some physicians’ coping mechanisms were less than ideal, with 36 percent stating they isolate themselves from others, while one-third eat junk food and 22 percent drink alcohol.

When it comes to seeking professional help with physician burnout or depression, psychiatrists were the likeliest to go that route, at 40 percent. Between 30–35 percent of plastic surgeons, public health physicians, pediatricians, ob-gyns and dermatologists gave similar responses. Urologists and cardiologists were the least likely to seek professional help.

To help prevent physician burnout, the AMA offers free online resources through the STEPS Forward™ collection of educational modules. Physicians can learn ways they can improve practice efficiency and develop organizational changes to prevent burnout, increase satisfaction, and improve resiliency.

## Some physicians also report depression

The “National Physician Burnout & Depression Report 2018,” published by *Medscape*, also examined depression among physicians. The report indicated that 14 percent of all physicians surveyed were both burned out and depressed.

Specialties with the highest rates of reported depression were:

- | Ob-gyns: 20 percent.
- | Public health physicians: 18 percent.
- | Urology: 17 percent.
- | Neurology: 17 percent.

*Medscape* also released a report based on an annual survey of physicians' lifestyle and happiness. It asked physicians about their lifestyles and experience with burnout and depression, including exercise, weight, religion, work satisfaction and choice of car. Allergists were the happiest outside of work, at 61 percent, but cardiologists pulled up the rear with only 40 percent happy off the job.