

Every doctor you've admired has dealt with burnout

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There is a physician burnout epidemic in the U.S. With almost half of all physicians suffering from burnout, it is important for doctors to understand they are not alone in how they are feeling. Even physicians who have achieved the heights of the profession have experienced burnout at some point in their careers.

The AMA offers CME on physician burnout 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.

Meanwhile, 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.

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.

Some of the nation's top doctors spoke with the AMA and shared the personal tools or systems changes they have found to be most useful in preventing or alleviating physician burnout. Here is their advice.

Take control of your work environment

"People who look at medicine as a job and who feel powerless to take control of their work environment, have burnout," said Barbara L. McAneny, MD, a board-certified medical oncologist/hematologist from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who became the 173rd president of the AMA in June. She is also managing partner of the New Mexico Cancer Center, the state's first physician-owned multidisciplinary cancer center in the state with clinics in Albuquerque and Gallup.

“In my career, for the last 20 years of seeing patients and being the managing partner, the success of solving problems has kept me from burnout,” she said. “Feeling like you made a difference in someone’s life is the best antidote to burnout, so you need a system that lets you do that.”

Take time for yourself

“At my local gym, I am often referred to as ‘the mayor’ as I will ensure that I make it to class despite my [more than] 80-hour workweek,” said Fatima Cody Stanford, MD, MPH, MPA, an obesity medicine physician scientist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School.

“While I am certain that I still have some burnout, this has helped to mitigate much of the burnout that I inevitably experience as a physician scientist in a very rigorous environment,” she said. “I do realize that we are conditioned to put everyone before ourselves. I have been guilty of this, and I continue to strive to create ‘work-life balance’ in the midst of what often seems to be ‘work-work balance.’”

Look to your community for support

“Long hours in the hospital are more enjoyable when you know and like the people you work with and, in parallel, outside the hospital having family to re-center me—or friends to decompress—served as my medicine to stay healthy,” said Tina R. Shah, MD, MPH, a pulmonary and critical care physician. She is the 2018 winner of the Dr. Edmond and Rima Cabbabe Dedication to the Profession Award from the AMA Foundation.

“It is OK that you are feeling burned out. Chances are, most of your colleagues are too,” Dr. Shah said. “The first step is to acknowledge it. ... Seek community and support because it’s not a one-size-fits-all solution.”

Don’t be ashamed to ask for help

“This is a hard job and people will generally be understanding and will pitch in to get you through it,” said Robert Wachter, MD, chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine.

“When I was going through a difficult time myself, a wise friend gave me the best advice I’ve ever received: ‘There is nothing in your life that is so bad that you can’t make it better.’ That may not be true in the very short term, but physicians have lots of options, including taking time off,” Dr. Wachter

said.

Regularly evaluate your stress levels

“Burnout typically results from unrelenting stress, so I encourage my colleagues to regularly self-evaluate their stress levels and their sense of work-life harmony,” said Ronald Vender, MD, professor of medicine and chief medical officer at Yale Medicine.

“If you are finding yourself experiencing more stress, you need to intervene before burnout develops,” he said. “If burnout has developed, you need to recognize it and begin the process of dealing with it. Spend more time with your loved ones. Make sure you are exercising, and spend some time in nature at least once a week.”

Set boundaries, create joy and make changes

“You have to set limits and learn that you can say no to things,” said Tejal Gandhi, MD, chief clinical and safety officer at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Boston. “Burnout occurs when you feel overburdened. It impacts the joy you feel and the meaning you find in your work, and that can have a direct impact on the quality and safety of care.”

“In those moments, feel empowered to speak up, communicate what matters to you, and make changes in your routine that prioritize your needs,” she said. “When people are joyous and find meaning in what they do, they’re more alert, curious and better able to learn. When you reach that point, joy in work becomes a resource for excellence.”

Define, discover your inner spirit

“Recognize that there is a spirit that lives inside you,” said Bennet Omalu, MD, MPH, a forensic pathologist who discovered chronic traumatic encephalopathy. “Learn to feed that spirit, build up that spirit, manifest that spirit and most of all celebrate that spirit and learn to be happy and joyful.”

“Do not let your job as a physician consume you and define who you are,” he said. “You are who you are with or without medicine, and come what may, you are you. You must learn to be yourself and be happy being yourself.”