

# 4 personal reasons why some doctors have a lower risk of burnout

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Physician burnout is a multifactorial problem that is not easily solved. A systems approach is recommended to reduce physician burnout and foster professional well-being, says a report from the National Academy of Medicine. But as system-level solutions continue to be developed, what helps some physicians avoid burnout?

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 and reduce the challenges physicians face. By focusing on factors causing burnout at the system-level, the AMA assesses an organization's well-being and offers guidance and targeted solutions to support physician well-being and satisfaction.

Authors of the consensus study report published by National Academy of Medicine, *Taking Action Against Clinician Burnout: A Systems Approach to Professional Well-Being*, call for immediate action from the health care system to combat physician burnout and improve professional well-being.

“While many individual traits are not modifiable, states and context can vary over time and have stronger or weaker effects depending on the work context. Individual factors, such as personality traits, cognitive abilities, and decision styles play a crucial role in workers' performance and in their subjective responses to perceived task difficulty and workload,” says the report.

Work system factors continue to contribute to physician burnout and professional well-being. But here are four individual factors that may help doctors prevent the development of burnout.

## Personality and temperament

Openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism are widely considered to be the basic dimensions of personality. Perfectionism is another dimension that is commonly explored. It correlates with conscientiousness and neuroticism, says the report.

Several studies have found that higher levels of neuroticism and being an introvert lead to a higher likelihood of developing burnout. However, physicians who are easygoing, have a receptive personality and have an internal locus impact the relationship between work stress and burnout.

Self-efficacy—a physician’s belief in their own ability and comfort with decision-making—may also relate to how a person deals with stressors.

## Coping strategies

“Active or task-focused coping is associated with lower levels of psychological distress. Emotion-focused coping, such as wishful thinking, can moderate stress, but extensive reliance on it can lead to problems,” says the report.

Physicians who use “planful problem solving,” are at a decreased risk of depersonalization. Other coping strategies—such as getting regular sleep, exercise, and engaging in recreation or hobbies—have also been associated with a lower risk of burnout.

When physicians protect time away from work to be with spouses, partners, family and friends, as well as talking about their feelings with them, can be an effective way to manage stress and prevent burnout.

## Resilience

When referring to resilience, there are many definitions. For example, resilience can be the ability to persevere and remain positive.

It can also be “a mindset and skillset that enables individuals to maintain their performance and well-being under adversity,” says the report. “Resilience is considered a continuous, dynamic state that can be nurtured into a stronger and more effective attribute, at least up to a point.”

While resilience does include self-regulation and mindfulness, it also covers a person’s capacity for self-monitoring, ability to set limits and having an attitude that promotes engagement even through difficult issues at work.

Higher levels of resilience may lead to a decrease in risk for burnout while also improving work relationships.

## Personal relationships and support systems

This area can go both ways. While personal relationships can be a source of support, they can also cause stress. However, physicians with strong spousal support have experienced low emotional exhaustion.

Being a partner of a physician can create challenges because work-related stressors can affect home life and relationships. But establishing strong personal relationships and support systems can potentially prevent physician burnout and a person's ability to cope with stress.

The AMA's STEPS Forward™ open-access modules offer innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment. These courses can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine and improve practice efficiency. One CME module specifically addresses physician burnout.



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