How to care for health professionals during crisis and beyond

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A crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic is inherently stressful and involves uncertainty, unpredictability and increased work intensity. This weighs heavily on the well-being of physicians and other health professionals. Short term stress can lead to long term growth and thriving, but it can also lead to long term stress injury and illness depending on the infrastructure, culture and actions of an organization. But how can an organization address prepare before, during and after a crisis to create a resilient culture?

The AMA offers resources to help physicians manage their own mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides practical strategies for health system leadership to consider in support of their physicians and care teams during COVID-19.

One resource is, “Creating a Resilient Organization.” The module is co-written by Tait Shanafelt, MD, chief wellness officer at Stanford School of Medicine, Jonathan Ripp, MD, chief wellness officer at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Marie Brown, MD, the AMA’s director of practice redesign, and Christine Sinsky, MD, the AMA’s vice president of professional satisfaction.

By creating a plan to provide support during and after a crisis, organizations can help maintain a healthy and efficient workforce to continue to meet social needs. These preparations should include plans to support physical, emotional and psychosocial needs of physicians and other health professionals.

“It is also critical for organizations to attend to the well-being of the health care workforce prior to an emergency so that they do not enter times of crises with a team that is already exhausted, depleted and burned out,” says the module.

The module provides a 17-step process for activities before, during and after a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are the three main areas of creating a resilient organization.
Before: Establishing a plan

Creating a resilient organization before a crisis happens is key to the success of physicians and other health professionals. First, appoint a chief wellness officer (CWO) and establish a professional well-being program. As a crisis event unravels, the CWO and well-being program can quickly shift focus to meet the growing needs of physicians and other health professionals.

Organizations should also create a plan that addresses care for the health care workforce during crisis. This plan should be coordinated with leadership to ensure successful roll out. Find out how Mount Sinai keeps physician well-being in focus during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, organizations should:

- Develop a plan to support workforce needs for professional competency during crisis reassignments.
- Establish a plan to suspend or reduce non-essential tasks.
- Develop mechanisms to assess stress and needs within the workforce.

During: Providing support

Support physicians and other health professionals during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. With a pre-existing plan in place, assess the current situation and evaluate the adaptability to the current circumstances. Even the best planned playbooks created before a crisis might not be enough to meet the current needs. These plans can be adapted by the CWO to meet the growing needs of the physicians and other health professionals. If necessary, organizations should develop new support and resources that address the needs specific to the crisis.

Another key factor during a crisis is to emphasize and embody the importance of visible leadership. With a rapidly changing environment, uncertainty can lead to added stress and anxiety. However, good communications can help reduce stress and improve well-being. Learn more about five ways organizations can effectively address physician anxiety.

During a crisis, organizations should also:

- Connect with other institutions, share and learn together.
- Assess the needs and stress level within the workforce at regular intervals.
- Adapt support plan to meet evolving needs.


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After: Learning from a crisis

Change continues even after a crisis has ended. Learning from a crisis will help organizations become even more resilient and effective in the future. One way to accomplish this is to debrief unit by unit and by profession. These debriefs allow physicians and other health professionals to share their experiences, concerns and thoughts.

As difficult as it is to consider facing another crisis, it is important to learn from the current situation while it is still fresh. Make sure to catalogue what was learned and update the plan for the next crisis. It is also important to deploy an organization-wide approach for supporting everyone after the crisis has subsided. Remember to identify new needs to facilitate recovery and restoration.

Other steps after a crisis include:

- Honor the dedication, commitment and sacrifice of health care professionals.
- Memorialize health care professionals that have been lost.
- Resume efforts to attend to organizational and system factors that promote well-being and create a resilient organization.

The AMA is offering two free surveys to help health care organizations monitor the impact COVID-19 has on their workforce during this pandemic. The surveys can be used to track trends in stress levels, identify specific drivers of stress, and develop supportive infrastructures based on these drivers. Organizations that use the surveys will receive free-of-charge support from the AMA in launching the surveys and access to data through an easy-to-use reporting dashboard.

The AMA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are closely monitoring the COVID-19 global pandemic. Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center and consult the AMA’s physician guide to COVID-19.