

# Amid COVID-19 strain on physicians, 5 steps to build peer support

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A key component of professional well-being is having support and trust among colleagues within an organization. In medicine this is imperative during times of significant stress, such as being on the front lines of care during the current COVID-19 pandemic. An organization's response to adverse events should shift away from a culture of shame and blame to one of support. This can be accomplished through peer support.

The availability of a peer support program is an essential component of creating a change in the culture of an organization, according to the AMA STEPS Forward™ module, "Peer Support Programs for Physicians." This free online module provides a list of key steps to complete that are the building blocks of a peer support program.

## Make the case to leadership

It is generally agreed upon that it is important to promote physician well-being and prevent burnout. However, organizational leadership may need to be convinced that there are benefits to developing a peer support program. To make the case for peer support to leadership, turn to the data about negative outcomes experienced after adverse events. For example, one negative outcome is increased physician burnout and decreased quality of patient care.

During adverse events such as a pandemic, most physicians prefer to receive support from colleagues rather than mental health practitioners. Peer supporters can facilitate connections with mental health services by de-stigmatizing such services. They can also facilitate access to them for physicians in need.

Learn more about using the power of peer support to positively impact medicine.

## Decide who the program will serve

Looking at the organization's bandwidth and how the program will be resourced, it is important to decide who will be offered peer support. Some organizations have chosen to offer peer support to all health professionals. But others have limited the program to only physicians.

Ideally, the program will be available to support any team member. However, with limited funding and leadership support, an organization might begin setting up the program to support only physicians and then expand later.

Learn more about this health system's peer support program that strives to ease distress during the pandemic.

## Form a peer-support team

It is vital that a peer-support team is formed to develop and sustain the program. This will involve selecting or appointing individuals to fill three essential roles: program director, program administrator and peer supporter.

The program director should be appointed to oversee the peer supporter selection process and lead the program. This should be a physician or person in leadership who is well-respected professionally among their peers and has strong communication skills. However, because the program may account for up to 20% of the program director's time, it is important that they can dedicate that time before accepting.

## Train peer supporters, launch program

Use empathetic listening, question-asking, and sharing of personal experiences when training peer supporters for their role in the program. Whether remotely or in-person, the training should be completed in a private setting. Once peer supporters are trained, regular meetings should be conducted to provide ongoing training.

When launching, implement a referral and outreach program for peer support. It is important to offer it early in the process of an adverse event and it should be actively offered after a challenging circumstance instead of being passively available. Through a referral and outreach program, physicians and other health professionals can provide active outreach to those who may need peer support.

The program should be publicized so that in the face of emotional stressors, physicians and other health professionals will be more inclined to self-refer or refer peers for support. This can be done during grand rounds, quality and safety conferences, faculty meetings, medical staff meetings, and onboarding or orientations.

## **Activate interventions, additional resources**

Peer support sessions will cover a series of questions to better understand each individual seeking help. For example, supporters might ask, “What, if anything, is bothering you or worrying you about this event?” or “What are your coping strategies for stressful times?”

While peer support interventions are offered once or twice for a given event, some individuals might want or need further assistance. This formal peer support can normalize and facilitate access to other resources such as mental health counseling or stress reduction resources. Without facilitation, peers might be reluctant to seek further help due to stigma and cultural expectations of being strong.

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.

Additionally, 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.