

Generational divide: 4 ways physician burnout differs by age

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Too many bureaucratic tasks and long hours at work have made health care a demanding profession that often results in physician burnout. The issue of physician burnout continues to have a significant impact on personal and professional lives—especially as doctors navigate the COVID-19 pandemic—but does it affect generations differently? An online survey of doctors conducted prior to the pandemic found that Generation X physicians experience burnout more often than millennials and baby boomers.

The survey finds the physician burnout rate continues to drop and remains below 50% among doctors in the U.S., which mirrors results from a triennial study from the AMA, the Mayo Clinic and Stanford University School of Medicine. However, more work still needs to be done.

More than 15,000 physicians from 29 specialties responded to the survey conducted by the Medscape news website. The survey asked about the prevalence of physician burnout factors and how different generations experience and respond to the pressure they face. Learn about which medical specialties feel the most stress.

In the Medscape survey, almost half of generation X (40–54 years old) physicians report burnout compared with 38% of millennials (25–39 years old) and 39% of baby boomers (55–73 years old). Generation X doctors are typically midcareer and might be juggling multiple roles outside of work.

While physician burnout is driven by factors common to doctors of any age, here are four ways the phenomenon differs by generation, according to the Medscape survey.

Causes of burnout

Too many bureaucratic tasks top the list for all three generations as the main cause of their burnout, exceeding 50%. These often include administrative tasks such as charting and paperwork. However,

41% of the baby boomer generation stated that increasing use of EHRs in practice were one of the top three factors contributing to burnout. For millennials, EHR use was at the bottom of the list of 10 potential factors.

Learn with the AMA about how the pandemic casts physician burnout in new light.

Severity of burnout

Of the physicians who reported experiencing at least one symptom of burnout, half of baby boomers were severely affected by it. This might be due to major changes experienced in physician practice, such as moving employed physician status or the difficulties of shifting to EHR use.

Almost half (46%) of generation X physicians also felt more severe effects from burnout, while 36% of millennials stated that burnout had little or no impact on their life. Learn about four personal reasons why some doctors have a lower risk of burnout.

Coping methods

Overall, 45% of physicians isolated themselves from others to cope with burnout. This was the same for baby boomers. However, 56% of millennials turned to sleep when coping with physician burnout, while 46% of generation X doctors exercised.

Access to well-being programs

When asked if their workplace offers a program to reduce stress and burnout, 28% said yes. However, 57% of boomers and 50% of generation X physicians said there were no programs available to combat stress and burnout.

Overall, 22% did not know whether such programs were available to them. That number was higher among millennials, with 27% saying they were not aware of a program.

Learn about 15 steps to navigate crises and promote physician well-being.

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.