

4 ways to support physicians during COVID-19 and beyond

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an urgent need to address the emotional well-being of physicians and other health professionals. The pandemic has also exposed cultural and structural barriers that cause many well-being programs to fail.

For this reason, programs should be designed to overcome these barriers using a range of strategies, including peer support, according to an essay published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

The essay, “Supporting Clinicians During Covid-19 and Beyond—Learning from Past Failures and Envisioning New Strategies,” was written by Jo Shapiro, MD, an associate professor of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery at Harvard Medical School, and Timothy McDonald, MD, JD, a pediatric anesthesiologist and professor of law at Loyola University in Chicago.

“Clinicians are facing important emotional stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic, including grief from seeing so many patients die, fears of contracting the virus and infecting their family members, and anger over health care disparities and other systems failures,” wrote Drs. Shapiro and McDonald, adding that immediate action is needed to improve the emotional health of physicians and other health professionals.

To do so, the essay details four strategies medical institutions can use to design emotional support programs.

Create and fund peer-support programs

One step that health systems and organizations can take is to create and provide funding for peer support programs.

“Programs built solely on a mental health model—in which the need for support is portrayed as applying to people with mental health disorders and treatment is provided by mental health

professionals—aren't used by many people who might benefit from them," says the essay.

Instead, physicians are more likely to accept support from a colleague who may understand what they are going through. The peer-support model helps to reduce stigma associated with receiving help. It also helps to foster a sense of camaraderie that is crucial to restoring and maintaining joy in medicine.

Learn more from the AMA about five steps to build peer-support programs.

Make physician outreach a priority

Health systems should also prioritize reaching out to those who may benefit from receiving help. To do this, they should develop systems for offering support to physicians and other health professionals rather than relying solely on self-referral.

"Even when emotional-support programs exist, physicians rarely seek them out because of barriers including concerns about confidentiality, stigma and access," says the *NEJM* essay. "Programs should therefore have a robust component that involves proactively reaching out to clinicians and that destigmatizes receiving support and facilitates access."

Discover how a peer-support program strives to ease distress during pandemic.

Provide easily accessible mental health support

Access is key. Health systems should provide easily accessible and psychologically safe "reach-in" services for physicians asking for help. Some emotional stress can be mitigated through preventive measures like a peer support program. However, others might need professional mental health services, which must be confidential, affordable and accessible all the time.

"In these cases, having peer supporters make initial contact with clinicians has the advantage of normalizing and facilitating connections to professional mental health resources," explains the perspective.

Here is how to use the power of peer support to positively impact medicine.

Hold leadership accountable for well-being

It is also vital that health system leaders empower physicians to speak up about unsafe, highly stressful or morally challenging situations at work. In turn, leaders must also ensure those concerns are listened to and, when possible, acted on.

For example, stress in the workplace can be caused by inadequate resources as well as unsustainable clinical volume and hours. When leaders make statements about their commitment to reduce burnout, but are missing efforts to address underlying issues, trust is eroded.

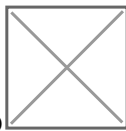
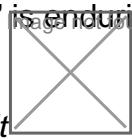
Accountability among leaders for support initiatives should include investment in resources, elimination of access barriers, guidance for executives and development of measures to track process.

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.

Further, 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.

The CME module, “Peer Support Programs for Physicians,” is enduring material and designated by

the AMA for a maximum of 0.5 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit*.



This module is part of the AMA Ed Hub, an online platform with top-quality CME and education that supports the professional development needs of physicians and other health professionals. With topics relevant to you, it also offers an easy, streamlined way to find, take, track and report educational activities.

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