

4 ways for physicians to overcome the perfectionist mindset

FEB 16, 2021

Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

Before the pandemic began, there had been a decline in physician burnout. However, as COVID-19 continues to devastate the country, physician burnout remains an ongoing issue that has taken on new dimensions, explained AMA member Alexa B. Kimball, MD. While physician burnout is predominantly driven by systemic factors, it is important for doctors to recognize how their experience can be exacerbated by a perfectionist mindset.

“As physicians, we seek to cure our patients and may be disappointed when limited by poor or unclear outcomes, time, resources, knowledge and technology,” said Dr. Kimball, CEO and president of Harvard Medical Faculty Physicians at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Learn more from the AMA about a dozen changes that have eased physician burnout at Beth Israel.

“Physicians have typically entered their field after succeeding through several highly competitive processes, which increase the presence of” perfectionism or similar traits, she said in an AMA interview.

Here is what Dr. Kimball had to say about developing self-awareness and overcoming perfectionist tendencies to battle physician burnout.

Reframe what is important

“Part of it is self-awareness and recognizing it in yourself so that you can actually process how you want to think about it,” said Dr. Kimball. But “the key thing is giving yourself permission and forgiveness.”

However, physicians should also reframe “what’s important and what’s not important,” she said, adding that “something that was important, might not be important today, but then might be important again in the future and that’s OK.”

Read about how the pandemic casts physician burnout in new light.

Let some things go

Developing self-awareness and recognizing perfectionism “takes on a different theme during the pandemic,” said Dr. Kimball. “You just have to let some stuff go because this is not the way we’re used to living life or taking care of patients.”

Finding “both the adaptive flexibility and the resilience to continue to change is critical,” she said, noting that if something has always been done one way because “that’s the way you liked it, you may have to give yourself permission to not do some things.”

Embrace imperfection

“Personal strategies that embrace imperfection, reframe challenges as opportunities, focus on process rather than product, and seek self-acceptance with perceived shortcomings may be helpful in addressing feelings of burnout on a personal level,” said Dr. Kimball.

“Introducing curricula during residency and at national meetings geared toward helping residents and physicians to focus on promoting resilience and a growth mindset could help to address the perfectionist phenomenon and the risk of burnout on a broader, specialty-wide level.

“Shifting both the selection and training processes from its heavy reliance on extrinsic motivation toward intrinsic motivation may also be a critical step in shifting culture,” she added.

Connect with colleagues

“Efforts to restore conversations among physicians are helpful in mitigating burnout,” Dr. Kimball said. “During COVID, these conversations can—and should—take place virtually.

“Setting up a clinical call to share challenges, questions and provide support to colleagues is one essential step for those practicing in group settings,” she added, noting that “for individual practitioners, this can be accomplished by joining a physician’s organization.”

Harvard Medical Faculty Physicians and Physician Performance LLC, she said, “have set up these types of calls for members, which has made it easier to connect with others,” said Dr. Kimball.

Physician “burnout was a major issue for physicians before this pandemic and will continue to be,” said Dr. Kimball. However, it has “changed in terms of how we need to think about it in some ways, but at the core, we need to really continue to dedicate ourselves to supporting our workforce of physicians who have given so much to so many over this period of time.”

Discover six ways to address physician stress during COVID-19 pandemic.

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.