

Know what to do when a peer is experiencing significant stress

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Throughout the pandemic, physicians and other health professionals have faced a significant amount of stress, especially on the front lines of COVID-19 care. This psychological stress can cause injury to the mind and body that goes beyond burnout. But administering stress first aid can make a difference.

A stress injury is, “any severe and persistent distress or loss of ability to function caused by damage to the brain, mind or spirit after exposure to the overwhelming stressors of fatigue (burnout), trauma, loss or moral injury,” according to the AMA STEPS Forward™ toolkit, “Stress First Aid for Health Care Professionals.”

Knowing what to do when a physician or other health professional experiences a stress injury is key to restoring resiliency and joy in medicine.

Understanding stress first aid

Stress first aid is defined as a framework for peer support and self-care for physicians and other health professionals. Picture this model as how a clinician or first-responder approaches physical first aid. As needed, stress first aid is used to remove a stressor, prevent further harm and promote recovery.

While this framework can be employed when supporting a peer, it can also be self-administered when an individual is aware of a potential injury in themselves. Health systems and organizations can also train a team of health professionals to administer stress first aid to their colleagues.

Discover four steps health systems can take to boost pandemic resiliency, including stress first aid.

Uncovering essential needs

Within the stress first aid framework there are five essential needs that contribute to increased resilience and recovery when facing adverse circumstances. Those five needs are:

- | A sense of safety.
- | Calming.
- | Social support.
- | Occupational and coping competence.
- | Confidence in oneself, others and the future.

These essential needs contributed to the core functions of the stress first aid model, which aim to improve self-care or support a colleague who may be experiencing a stress injury. The core functions follow a continuum of aid once a stressor is identified and allows an individual to navigate a path to well-being.

This toolkit also covers steps that should be taken to provide stress first aid, such as recognizing a stress injury and providing primary aid and secondary aid. Read about how this first-aid kit will help you treat stress in health care.

Additionally, 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.

AMA STEPS Forward open-access toolkits 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, “Stress First Aid for Health Care Professionals,” 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 high-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.

Learn more about AMA CME accreditation.