

With pandemic's end not in sight, 8 ways to deal with the stress

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There's a crisis in the doctor's office. There are dire straits in intensive care units. Not only has this year seen a barrage of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths, but there has also been an added layer of disappointment: low vaccination rates. This combination can be emotionally draining for physicians and other health professionals on the front lines.

Using the AMA Coping with COVID-19 for Caregivers Survey, over 130 health care organizations across the U.S. assessed their workers' stress during the pandemic. The initial research of 20,947 physicians and other workers found that 49% of health workers reported burnout amid COVID-19. Another 43% suffered from work overload while 38% self-reported experiencing anxiety or depression.

While there is no silver-bullet solution for individuals, there are some ways to cope with the associated stress of this stage of the pandemic.

1 Administer stress first aid

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. Find out how administering stress first aid can make a difference.

2 Use the power of peer support

The COVID-19 pandemic's burden on physicians and health professionals is cognitive, physical and emotional. One way to address it is through a peer-support program, which can positively affect, and shape, the culture of medicine during the pandemic and moving forward.

3 Connect with your colleagues

While peer-support programs serve a vital role, they tend to only address the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the distress and disconnection experienced by many physicians. Going beyond peer-support programs, it is important to create processes for intentional professional connection—so that no one delivers care alone.

4 Turn to a physician coach

Employee-assistance programs (EAPs) are widely offered across health systems and other organizations. However, physicians make up less than 2% of those who use an EAP. That's often because doctors don't trust the information to remain confidential. Learn about a wellness program that addresses well-being by using physicians as coaches.

5 Understand it's OK to not be OK

"We learned more than ever in 2020 ... that we need to promote the culture that it's OK to not be OK," said AMA member Heather Spies, MD, medical director of clinician experience

at Sanford Health. “Ten years ago, 20 years ago, it was very much a part of the culture of being a physician ... to not show that you were stressed or not show that you were drowning at times. We know that that is not sustainable, that is not healthy, and that is not the best for caring for our patients and for each other.”

6 Implement habits of gratitude

Early in his medical career, family physician Mark Greenawald, MD, had the honor of caring for a patient with cancer. Learn how this terminally ill patient taught Dr. Greenawald the value of gratitude, and how that can be meaningfully implemented to boost well-being in health care.

7 Know how to cope with moral distress

The ever-increasing death toll from COVID-19 isn't the only thing that has been hard on physicians during the pandemic. Many doctors have also had to confront ethical challenges, leading some to wonder whether their actions still point true north on their moral compasses.

8 Practice smarter self-care

Nutrition plays an important role in the maintenance of a person's health and well-being. While system level solutions to address physician burnout are most effective, self-care can also play a role. And a big part of self-care for physicians is eating right. By learning more about nutrition and keeping the topic front and center, physicians can take better care of themselves—and their patients.

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.