

In stressful times for women doctors, self-care can go a long way

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The COVID-19 pandemic upended the playbook for women physicians, bringing an onslaught of fears and stressors about their health, families and patients. A webinar hosted by the AMA Women Physicians Section offered insights on how to encourage well-being, improve empathy and mitigate trauma through connection and communication.

Women physicians are four times more likely than men to commit suicide, Charlene M. Dewey, MD, MEd, professor of medical education and administration at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, said during the webinar. “It is only human to need help from other people.”

Dr. Dewey was joined by Kemia M. Sarraf, MD, MPH, an adjunct assistant professor with the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. Together they offered solutions for coping and thriving during these difficult times.

Living in fear and uncertainty

The unrelenting concerns posed by COVID-19 and other outside stressors have taken their toll on women physicians, the speakers noted.

“For two years we’ve been in this uncertainty, trying to address, manage and adopt to our new way of normal life,” said Dr. Dewey.

The pandemic has affected the way physicians and other health professionals approach care, while challenging beliefs about safety. Organizations also took significant financial hits, as society reacted divergently to the vaccination movement.

Many physicians even came home at the end of the day and thought, “Do I have two weeks left to live?” said Dr. Dewey. Women physicians often struggled with the additional stressor of child care issues at home, while trying to support patients facing access to care problems.

Dr. Sarraf recalled the difficult balancing act of trying to home-school four children while doing her job as a front-line public health physician. Many health professionals feared they were going to have to leave this profession to survive, she said.

The AMA has policy to work with interested stakeholders to investigate solutions for innovative child care policies as well as flexible working environments for all health professionals, particularly medical students, residents and fellows.

Room for improvement

Several polls taken live during the webinar revealed some opportunities to improve mood and resilience. When asked if they were thriving versus surviving, the majority of attendees (72%) said they were somewhere in between, whereas 24% said they were still in survival mode.

Women physicians need to get to a point where they are thriving and feeling empowered, said Dr. Dewey.

The AMA recognizes that gender inequity in medicine is a complex issue that requires a multilayered approach. Promoting gender equity in medicine requires an acknowledgement of the underlying causes of gender-based disparities, creation of policies and resources that will promote gender equity and collaboration to improve the environment for women and the profession overall.

Read about how COVID-19 is affecting the mental health of women physicians.

Getting help

Self-care is a method for moving forward, Dr. Dewey advised. Putting yourself first and thinking about what you can control are good first steps.

Seek assistance, whether it’s inside or outside of your organization, she said. The AMA, American College of Physicians and National Academies of Medicine all have great resources for coping mechanisms.

“You can also access private counseling and professional coaching services,” Dr. Dewey said, noting that prioritizing wellness, getting enough sleep and nutrition to prevent and manage stress are all important.

“Social connections are so important ... talking about the challenges you're facing with people who are comfortable in that space, and who you can trust in a psychologically safe place, is also very critical,” she said.

Additionally, physicians should do their best to manage their energy and expectations both at home and work, Dr. Dewey said. For example, try to stay away from things that drain your energy, such as too much time on Zoom.

Discover how physicians and health systems can cut stigma on seeking help.

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.