Preventing physician suicide

We must be vigilant for signs of burnout and depression within ourselves and among our colleagues, and we must not hesitate to seek help when we recognize something is amiss. Physicians have resilience and self-reliance in abundance, but when we rely on those traits above all others, we put our own well-being and that of our patients and colleagues at risk.

— Susan R. Bailey, MD, president (2020–2021), American Medical Association

Suicide among physicians

Physicians are at a higher risk of suicide and suicidal ideation than the general population.¹ Suicidal ideation has been associated with high workload volume² and medical errors.³ Although previous research linked physician burnout to depression and suicide, a recent investigation suggests that burnout and depression are separate experiences, with distinct consequences for physicians and their patients.⁴ Physicians who experience suicidal ideation have been shown to be less likely to seek the help they need.

Factors associated with suicide among physicians include:

- Depression⁵
- Emotional exhaustion¹
- Impaired relationships⁶
- Self-destructive tendency⁵
- Substance-use disorder⁵
Identifying and addressing warning signs and risk factors

Taking proactive steps to identify and address physician distress can help to ensure the well-being of colleagues and reduce the risk of suicidal ideation. Additionally, it is imperative that physicians recognize the importance of self-care, model wellness behaviors, and encourage others to do the same.

Organizations should also note the importance of creating a supportive atmosphere in the workplace, which can be instrumental in addressing physician distress. Physician advocates can be valuable assets to an organization by providing support services to those in need of help. Additionally, referral lists for confidential resources inside and outside of the organization should be updated regularly and available to all team members, including physicians.

AMA efforts and resources to prioritize well-being and mental health

The AMA has joined a coalition of leading health care organizations for the “ALL IN: WellBeing First for Healthcare” campaign. The campaign was founded in 2020 by #FirstRespondersFirst and the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation to support and protect the well-being of the health care workforce.

The AMA STEPS Forward® practice innovation resources help recognize and support at-risk physicians, identify and respond to suicide risk, and act compassionately and effectively on the organizational level after suicide occurs.

AMA resources

- After a Physician Suicide: Respond Compassionately and Effectively as an Organization
- Caring for the Health Care Workforce During Crisis
- Collective Trauma: Respond Effectively as an Organization
- HEAR to Identify Care Team Members at Risk of Suicide
- Identifying and Responding to Suicide Risk
- Medical Student Well-Being: Minimize Burnout and Improve Mental Health Among Medical Students
- Peer Support Programs for Physicians
- Preventing Physician Suicide: Identify and Support At-Risk Physicians
- Stress First Aid for Health Care Professionals: Recognize and Respond Early to Stress Injuries

AMA news stories

- Is your physician colleague at risk for suicide? Signs to look for
- Now’s the time to have a difficult talk about physician suicide
- Q&A: Clearing up confusion on physician burnout and depression
- To ease physician burnout, ditch the stigma against getting help
- To encourage physicians’ healing, make it OK to ask for help
- When doctors ponder suicide, depression—not burnout—is key driver

If you or a colleague are thinking about suicide, please contact the Suicide Hotline at (800) 273-8255.
AMA-sponsored campaign

- All In: WellBeing First for Healthcare

Podcasts

- Creating a culture that supports well-being
- Mental health counseling for physicians and APPs
- No one left behind: Expanded peer support and second victim syndrome
- Three simple STEPS for diagnosing your own mental patterns

Research

- Association of Physician Burnout with Suicidal Ideation and Medical Errors
- Suicidal Ideation and Attitudes Regarding Help Seeking in US Physicians Relative to the US Working Population

Webinars

- Practical strategies for managing suicidal ideation and reducing risk
- The association of physician burnout with suicidal ideation and medical errors

References


