

EMPLOYED PRACTICE

Tackling Burnout in Employed Physicians

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Looking for greater flexibility, influence, and self-care opportunities within your organization can help keep burnout at bay.

Burnout, the significant mental and physical exhaustion brought on by a stressful work environment, has become a growing problem in the medical world.

With burnout rates among physicians exceeding 40 percent, physicians need tools to combat the personal and professional dysfunction that hurts themselves, their loved ones, their coworkers, and their patients.¹ Physicians who are overextended and unable to work at peak performance weaken patient satisfaction and quality of

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do have input is vital. Ask to serve on committees that matter to you. Many organizations have ways for staff to provide comments or express concerns, so look for these opportunities and be available for meetings on important issues. Even in challenging environments, having some areas where you can exert control can help you feel empowered.

Identify appropriate targets for your concerns or questions. Understanding the hierarchy in your organization is important. If you have concerns about your EHR or workflow but do not know who oversees those areas, you may spend a lot of time and energy complaining to people who cannot fix the problem. Learn which administrators are most receptive to hearing your input, and use them to help initiate changes. Additionally, when coming forward with concerns, avoid presenting complaints without having possible solutions. Aim to be a problem solver.

Remember the importance of self-care. Physicians often struggle with self-care because sacrificing sleep, exercise, and outside interests often played a role in how we got where we are. Medical school and residency required grueling hours and intense focus.

Physical, emotional, and spiritual rejuvenation take time away from our seemingly endless office schedules, call schedules, and overfilled task boxes. Do not assume you will just find time for these necessary “time outs.” Most offices require time-off requests three to six months in advance, so sit down and schedule them. Consider taking a vacation day as a “mental health day” once every month or two. Knowing you have this time to step away from your office burdens can give you something to look forward to when frustration creeps in.

In addition to taking time off, schedule time weekly for activities that are important to you. If you don't commit to scheduling those items, it becomes easy to let them stay on the bucket list. Regularly disconnecting from the office is also helpful. Turn off your cell phone and pager, defer your emails or tasks until a later time, and reconnect with family, friends, or even just yourself. At first it may be difficult to shift your focus, but you can take better care of your patients when you also take care of your needs.

Keep meaning in your work. Identify what drove you to medicine, and reconnect with your passion, maybe through volunteering your services to a community in need or mentoring medical students. Work with your employer to identify mutually beneficial career development opportunities that help your continued progression through increased clinical skills, research, or teaching. One of my colleagues keeps a “feel good journal” in which he writes down compliments and encouraging words he receives from patients and coworkers. When a day is particularly tough, looking back on the positive impact you have had on individuals can help remind you

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PREVENTING, RECOGNIZING, AND TREATING BURNOUT

American Academy of Family Physicians

<http://www.aafp.org/about/constituencies/resources/new-physicians/burnout.html>

American Medical Association

<https://www.stepsforward.org/modules/physician-burnout>

Family Practice Management

“Physician Burnout: Its Origin, Symptoms, and Five Main Causes” <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/2015/0900/p42.html>

“Eight Ways to Lower Practice Stress and Get Home Sooner” <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/2015/1100/p13.html>

“Four Tools for Reducing Burnout by Finding Work-Life Balance” <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/2016/0100/p28.html>

your work is important. What we do is often hard, but it can also be rewarding and reinvigorating.

Know when to move on. Most health care systems seek to empower and grow the skills of their employed physicians. They solicit feedback and identify areas for improvement. However, there are times when an environment is unusually toxic with little regard for employee wellness or a life apart from patient care. If physician input is ignored or discouraged and if the burden placed on providers is unreasonable, it may be necessary to look for a better working environment.

Physician burnout does not have a single, all-encompassing solution, and the suggestions above may not be easy. Overcoming burnout requires not only ongoing self care but also the recognition by our employers and ourselves that the challenges of caring for the sick are exacerbated when they are not acknowledged. In employed situations, it can become easy to feel like a mere cog in a large, uncaring machine. But even in these environments, we can be voices for change and find resources to prevent burnout. **FPM**

1. Medscape Physician Lifestyle Survey 2015. <http://wb.md/1BVCdqM>. Accessed May 6, 2016.

2. Singleton T, Miller P. The physician employment trend: what you need to know. *Fam Pract Manag.* 2015;22(4):11-15.

3. Shanafelt TD, Gorringer G, Menaker R, et al. Impact of organizational leadership on physician burnout and satisfaction. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2015;90(4):432-440.

4. Drummond D. Physician burnout: its origins, symptoms, and five main causes. *Fam Pract Manag.* 2015;22(5):42-47.

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