

Managing Stress, Preventing Burnout

What is the #1 stressor for physicians? Our imagination. **By Susan Reynolds, MD, PhD**

THE DELIVERY of healthcare with its new payment models, industry consolidation, reporting requirements, and frustrating IT systems are causing physicians to experience ever increasing stressors in their daily lives. Stress and burnout are so prevalent among physicians that I'm devoting my next two columns to the issue.

At a Chief of Staff Boot Camp® in 2015, 29.5% of the physicians were so stressed out on a standard survey that they would become ill within two years. Stress is defined as "mental, emotional, or physical strain caused, for example, by anxiety or overwork." It's not all bad. A certain amount of stress, such as an impending deadline, can increase performance. Too much stress results in decreased performance, and even burnout.

The #1 stressor is the imagination... regretting the past, fearing the future. However, the imagination can help reduce stress. Mindful focus on the present and relaxation techniques lead to improved performance and interpersonal interactions, and the ability to find opportunities in challenging times.

Mayo Clinic surveys show that burnout now affects over half of all physicians. Burnout isn't just increasing; it's an epidemic! The Mayo Clinic used the Maslach Burnout Inventory's three symptoms of burnout: loss of enthusiasm for work/emotional exhaustion; feelings of cynicism/depersonalization; and sense of low personal accomplishment.

Burnt out physicians are more likely to quit, more prone to addiction, and more likely to commit suicide. The male physician suicide rate is 40% higher than that of the United States male population; the female physician suicide rate is 130% higher than that of the U.S. female population.

How can you tell the difference between stress and burnout? If you recover after some time off, you're under a lot of stress. If you don't recover with time off, you are burnt out. My next column will explore ways to deal with stress and recover from burnout.

Look for more information on this vitally important topic in the next issue!

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