

Techniques to Manage Stress and Prevent Burnout

How physicians and their organizations can combat burnout **By Susan Reynolds, MD, PhD**

“Physicians can be their own worst patients. Have you seen patients while under extreme stress? What was your prescription? Work longer hours? Skip vacation time?”

IN LAST MONTH’S column, we looked at signs and symptoms of stress and burnout. The 2014 Mayo Clinic study showed that 54.4% of physicians had at least one symptom of burnout on the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and that number is increasing at an alarming rate. The Maslach Burnout Inventory symptoms include: loss of enthusiasm for work/emotional exhaustion; feelings of cynicism/depersonalization; and a sense of low personal accomplishment. While it is important to recognize how widespread these conditions have become, we need to go further and support physicians with specific coping techniques for relieving stress before burnout sets in.

It is also important to remember that stress itself does not cause illness. It is the inability to tolerate stress that does. Some people can tolerate stress much better than others based on genetics, emotional temperament, beliefs, and life experiences.

As previously noted, the imagination is the #1 stressor. Do you regret the past? Do you worry about the future? The imagination is a powerful tool that can also bring us equanimity and relaxation.

To deal with stress and burnout, physicians can develop mindfulness practices, learn better communication techniques, and improve their work-life balance. Ellen Langer has studied the effects of mindfulness practices for over 40 years and found that being mindful, focusing on the present, results in better performance, more positive results and interpersonal interactions, and the ability to find opportunities in challenging times.

Physicians can be their own worst patients.

Have you seen patients while under extreme stress? What was your prescription? Work longer hours? Skip vacation time? We all know the benefits of exercise, good nutrition, and adequate sleep, but physicians often neglect these key ingredients for a healthy way of living.

A regular meditation practice can provide a great deal of calm when stressors abound. Relaxation techniques frequently include mental imagery such as the “One-Minute Clock,” the “Golden Energy Ball,” or the “Inner Advisor,” which we present at our stress management workshops.

Organizations can help prevent physician burnout by allowing flexible work hours; monitoring signs and symptoms; and providing physician leadership training, support groups, and CME programs such as those we provide at The Institute for Medical Leadership.

Stanford has developed a unique “time-banking” program that provides “concierge” services for emergency medicine faculty. This program helps bring more balance into these tired doctors’ lives by taking care of mundane tasks. For instance, Stanford’s time-banked services can include meal delivery, housecleaning, babysitting, elder care, movie tickets, grant writing help, handyman services, dry cleaning pickup, speech training, and Web support. As a result, the physicians have more time to spend with family and friends. They also have time to rest and recharge their batteries, thereby living happier lives and preventing burnout.

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Resources

THERE ARE a variety of good resources available to help physicians understand stress and burnout and learn how to deal with them. Here’s a list of resources that I’ve found especially helpful:

- Mayo Clinic study: *Arch Internal Medicine*; 2012;172, 1377-1385
- Transitions, William Bridges, PhD
- TheHappyMD.com – Dr. Dike Drummond
- AMA: STEPS Forward
- ACEP: Wellness Book for Emergency Physicians
- Harvard Business Review (2014): Interview with Ellen Langer