

Is Stress Beating You Down, Doctor?

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A simple search on patient experience will pull up a mountain of literature on what patients expect from their healthcare providers. There is a lot of talk about brand impressions and perceptions, as well as disappointment that patients experience when dealing with a physician of their choice. The patient is the star attraction, and rightfully so, for healthcare practice brands that need to increasingly and often aggressively compete for market space. However, in all this noise about meeting expectations, empathizing with patients and respecting choices and doing what is right for the patient in keeping with the dictates of delivering stellar patient experience, the physician is often forgotten.

While there is no denying the fact that the role and responsibility of a physician is magnanimous in every way, it comes with immense work pressures that can sometimes severely limit the life of a physician outside his clinic. In a lot of instances, physicians experience a professional burnout, but still feel compelled to continue.

Straining Under the Weight of the “Noble” Profession

Healthcare providers are required to be caring and compassionate at all times. Being a doctor is a 24/7 job – however, trying to do what is right all the time with a smiling face can take its toll. Professional burnout is not uncommon among physicians. It is estimated that close to 30% to 40% of physicians in the United States experience a burnout.

In the course of upholding his professional responsibilities, a physician often faces difficult situations where decisions need to be made in haste. And in every situation, the responsibility and accountability of the outcome falls fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the physician. They are also required to deal with evolving mandates on patient care, navigate through reimbursement policies that are increasingly being linked to the new standards healthcare delivery, while also constantly keeping abreast with clinical developments and technological advancements in healthcare. Understanding and empathizing with this kind of responsibility and the ensuing stress that comes with it is almost impossible for those outside the medical fraternity.

All of this is made worse by the fact that doctors are seen as custodians of good health and admitting to an emotional or physical condition such as stress or a burnout carries a stigma. *The unspoken yet implied inference being – can a doctor who finds it difficult to shoulder the stresses of his profession be allowed to treat and care of patients.*

When Stress Becomes a Real Problem

Most physicians are averse to the idea of seeking medical help or treatment even if they are struggling with stress or a burnout. However, because of their professional expertise and also because they have much easier access to drugs, most physicians opt for self-medication. In some cases this works out in favor of the physician. Others are not as successful and end up misusing prescription drugs. This is often compounded with alcohol dependence or with a substance abuse issues.

The real problem however, is not the fact the physicians are not immune to stress and its other by-products; the real issue being that most physicians tend to suffer in silence. Fearing professional ostracization, most healthcare providers shy away from seeking help.

Unfortunately, physicians who choose to ignore the toll that stress is having or can have on their mental and physical health are on the fast-track to an emotional and physical burnout. This can lead to depression, diminishing job satisfaction, errors in judgment, excessive dependence on prescription drugs and alcohol and substance abuse, and even suicide. A life that is meant to care and heal others ending this way is a travesty.

Don't Wait for a Professional Burnout to Happen

Prevention is better than cure – if there ever was a better place or use for this popular proverb, this would be it! Don't wait till you are completely stressed out. Recognize the sign(s) and act on it. Determine a period of time such a week or ten days and identify stress triggers during that time. Maintain a log of situations or conditions when your stress levels shoot up. Keep a record of your emotional and/or physical response. Also make a note of actions or responses or any other steps you took to cope with your stress. Making adjustments or tweaking your response and coping mechanisms or even avoiding stress triggers becomes easier when you know what affects you and stresses you out.

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH STRESS, DOCTOR?



INTRODUCTION

Work-related stress is common among doctors. It can lead to anxiety and depression, errors in judgment, reduced job satisfaction, missing days from work, and even near misses.



IMMENSE PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The responsibility and pressure that comes with being in charge of a patient's health is enormous. Seeing and caring for patients day in and day out, following up on test results, dealing with piles of medical documentation and insurance company policies and requirements as well as navigating administrative mandates can easily cause a burnout. And it does cause a burnout at some point in most doctors.



STRESS AMONG HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS



In a national study of burnout among physicians in the U.S., **45.8% of physicians** said they experienced at least 1 symptom of work-related stress or burnout.



When compared to other working professionals in the U.S., a **burnout is more common among physicians**.



High stress levels of their work can often lead to depression, compromised relationships, substance and alcohol addictions, and even thoughts of suicide.



Physicians at the front line of **health care access** which includes family medicine, general internal medicine, and emergency medicine are at a greater risk of a burnout.

DEALING WITH STRESS IN A HIGH PRESSURE WORK ENVIRONMENT

On any given day, healthcare physicians are strapped for time and need to deal with demanding patients, they are saturated with information and are required to make tough decisions. Any errors on their part can lead to disastrous consequences. This kind of pressure and responsibility on a daily basis can be very hard to handle.



The most important step in dealing with stress is to register with a GP before any kind of problem manifests itself.



Share any kind of work problems with close circle of family, friends, and colleagues.



Admitting vulnerability and accepting professional limitations is necessary - at the end of the day, a physician is just a human-being.



If stress related problems arise, seek help early on rather than later.



Psychotherapy or counseling can help with stress management.

Stress Busters that Really Work

Condition Your Mind

It is not easy, but you need to let go of work once you are outside. Obsessing over your patient's health is not going to cure them. It certainly won't do you any good to stress about things that are not under your control. Even when faced with trying times, it is important to keep a positive attitude about your work and the kind of impact it has on people. You are helping people and that should always cloud any negatives you experience.

Condition Your Body

Exercise keeps your mind and your body fit and can help in bringing down anxiety and stress. But as a physician you already know that. Also remember, you are not invincible – as much as there is a need for your services, you also need to recognize the need for taking some time out for yourself. At the very least, steal a few minutes to stretch your legs or take a little walk. Being away from the desk and/or from the office can and does bring a fresh lease of life even to the most mundane jobs.

Don't Isolate Yourself

Family, friends, close colleagues, and support groups are and should be a part of your ecosystem. If you are facing problems or find yourself reeling under the stress and strains of your job, talk to those close around you and share your problems. Remember, talking and sharing your problems is less about finding a solution and more about unburdening yourself.

Accept your Limitations

Sometimes you just have to give in and take a step back. You are a doctor with a world of professional expertise to back you – but don't forget you need to contend with human limitations. Seeking help is a big part of accepting your limitations, so don't delay registering with a GP or seeking professional help from a psychotherapist or counselor.

Conclusion

Physicians live with enormous stress. No amount of medical school training can prepare a doctor or make him or her immune to the pressures of caring for patients. The doctor's office is a stressful and emotionally charged space not just for patients but equally so for the physicians attending to the patients. So it is extremely unreasonable to expect physicians to deal with stress on a daily basis and not get affected by it. As with any other profession, physicians need to guard themselves against stress and burnout before it causes irreparable damage to their professional and personal lives.

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