How to Spot Physician Burnout


Physician burnout is a serious problem. Here's how to recognize when it's a problem at your practice.

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Do you love your job? Do you get up every morning excited about the challenges and rewards of the day ahead? If you do, you're in the minority. According to recent surveys, more than half of U.S. physicians suffer from burnout. And the problem is getting worse.

A 2014 study by the Mayo Clinic and the American Medical Association found that 54.4 percent of physicians reported at least one symptom of burnout. That represented a 10 percent increase over 2011. Physicians in some specialties are at greater risk than others. Physician burnout has been widely covered in healthcare media. A New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) Catalyst survey found that 65 percent of clinicians and health care executives say burnout is a serious problem in the healthcare field (and 96 percent say it is at least a moderate problem). Yet only 35 percent of respondents acknowledged that it is a problem in their organizations.

What accounts for this seeming denial? Perhaps physicians are unwilling to answer survey questions in a way that might reflect poorly on their organizations. On the other hand, it could be that recognizing burnout is more difficult than being aware it is a problem. If you think burnout is something that only happens to other people, don't be so sure. Take a look at these common signs of burnout. If any of these apply to you, it's time to admit that you might be suffering from burnout.

You're exhausted. Practicing medicine is hard work, but you shouldn't feel totally wiped out at the end of the day. Remember when your work was energizing? If you're not feeling that now, it may be more than the long hours. "Doctors are taking charts home, staying up late, and working weekends. This is a prescription for burnout," says Dan Diamond, MD, a Bremerton, Washington-based family physician and consultant who specializes in helping physicians (and others) develop resilience during stressful situations. Hard work is a virtue—up to a point. But even physicians are human, and there's only so much one person can do.

You have compassion fatigue. Being cynical or making snide comments about your patients is a classic sign of burnout. "The qualities that drive physicians to medicine—the need to be of service, to help people—also have a shadow side," explains Daniel Friedland, MD, a consultant based in San Diego, California. One of those shadows, he says, "is compassion fatigue."

You're making mistakes. "You're more likely to miss things and make mistakes if you're suffering from burnout...There's plenty of data showing that patients suffer when physicians are burned out," says Diamond. It's important to acknowledge and address burnout because it isn't just about you. "I believe that burnout is the biggest threat to health care we have today," says Diamond.

If you have any of the above symptoms, reach out for help. Burnout can happen to anybody—but it doesn't have to end your career.

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