



Physician Stress

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Myths in Medicine

An examination of physician stress must begin with a review of the medical myths that not only set physicians up to experience stress, but also make it difficult for many of us to recognize or admit that we are under significant stress. Our training leads us to believe that any uncertainty in the practice of medicine is a sign of weakness; we must be all knowing all the time. Emotional revelation also is viewed as a sign of weakness by many physicians, often subconsciously. We learn to put our patients first, often at great personal cost, particularly during training when our own health may suffer significantly. As we conclude training, the belief that we are immune from illness has been reinforced. Everything in our history tells us that technical excellence will provide all the satisfaction we will ever need, we have no requirements beyond that point.

Physician-related Causes of Stress

An honest appraisal of stress in our lives should take into account the personal characteristics of physicians. Often the very qualities that make us good doctors also contribute to stress in our lives. Physicians are perfectionists, and we need to be in control of every situation. These characteristics create an exaggerated sense of responsibility, leaving us with excessive, unrealistic guilt when things go wrong.

Physicians do an excellent job of suppressing their feelings, a condition reinforced by the above myths. And ask for help? No way, perfectionists in charge don't ask for help. We *are* the help. That's why so many of us have difficulty with simple life occurrences, such as taking a vacation or enjoying leisure time. It's hard to relax when you're always responsible.

What can we do?

Some physician stressors are easily anticipated: time pressures, chronic fatigue, dealing with life and death issues, difficult, demanding or chronically ill patients. We know these issues inside and out. Maintaining our clinical competence, always important, has become a foreseeable stressor with new requirements for 40 hours of continuing medical education every two years.

Continued: What can we do?

For most of us, it's the unexpected issues that cause the most debilitating stress. No one ever tells us during training how to handle violent patients, or how to repair breakdowns in the doctor-patient relationship. We are somehow supposed to magically know how to handle third party intrusions and government regulation in our practice. We cannot openly discuss our concerns and often outright fears over the increase in malpractice litigation and the resulting pressure to practice defensive medicine.

By now, it should come as no surprise to us that the stresses in physician lives can lead to addictive behavior, relationship distress and emotional and behavioral problems. The professional consequences of stress in our lives can threaten our careers.

Learning to Cope

Stress is a part of all of our lives. It is unrealistic to think that we can eliminate stress from our lives and practices. Recognition of the level of stress we live under and its impact on our lives is the first step toward managing stress. Taking this important first step allows us to then take responsibility for managing stress and finding ways to cope with crises. Some of the best strategies for physicians to manage stress include:

- Learn to relax and meditate
- Practice acceptance, restore or renew your spiritual life
- Make a gratitude list, recognize your blessings
- Monitor use of alcohol and drugs
- Develop a support network – talk to friends, physicians and those outside the medical community
- Physical exercise
- Develop a positive attitude – see life as a challenge and an opportunity
- Open yourself to new experiences – try new things, food and places
- Give personal and family relationships the necessary time and effort
- Develop hobbies, have a life outside of medicine
- Take time off – vacations as well as daily personal time to restore your spirit
- Recognize when to seek professional help

Each of these strategies works in different ways to restore balance in our lives. It is not enough to engage in just one or two strategies; to truly achieve balance in our lives, we must recognize all of life's dimensions.

It is important for physicians to learn to care for themselves. If we can accept the fact that there will be a certain level of stress in our lives, take responsibility for stress management and master stress reduction strategies, we can avoid many of the long-term and often career damaging effects of stress. Learning to value ourselves as people first, rather than as physicians, will prevent every stressful situation from becoming a crisis.

Physicians' Health Program – Not Just Alcohol and Drugs

For many years, the Physicians' Health Program served primarily alcohol and drug dependent physicians. We still intervene and assist physicians with chemical dependency; in fact the list of substances physicians must overcome has grown and today includes drugs such as oxycontin and ultram, which were not even available when the program began.

Today, the PHP addresses physician problems masked by chemical dependency, such as disruptive behavior, boundary issues, psychiatric issues, improper prescribing, cognitive defects and stress or career concerns. In cases where there is no chemical dependency, the PHP will work with physicians to help correct the underlying problems and restore lives and practices. In working with physicians, I find that inadequate stress management often leads to other debilitating issues and must be addressed on an individual basis to give physicians the support they need.

Physicians can easily access the TMF Physicians Health Program by calling (615) 467-6411 or writing the TMF, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Nashville, TN, 37027. All communications to the program are strictly confidential.