



# Coping with Medical Malpractice Stress, Part II

By Roland W. Gray, MD  
TMF Medical Director

If a physician is fortunate to live long enough and practice long enough, nearly nine out of 10 will be sued for malpractice. In the Physician Health Program and in a workshop with State Volunteer Mutual Insurance Company entitled “Anatomy of a Medical Malpractice Lawsuit,” I educate doctors on the emotional aspects of dealing with malpractice stress and offer suggestions and resources to help them and their families. In part one of our article series we discussed the stress and emotional reaction to a medical malpractice lawsuit; in this article we conclude our discussion by outlining the coping mechanisms we see, and the preferred ones we recommend to our physician clients.

There are good – and bad – mechanisms for coping with stress and in particular, stress caused by a malpractice lawsuit. Many physicians during times of stress begin to self-medicate with either alcohol or mood altering drugs. Once this starts, they are heading down a slippery slope and I will say at this point the incidence of alcohol and drug dependency in physicians is not decreasing. They may develop GI symptoms. A number of physicians may also develop some post traumatic stress symptoms; these may include intrusive thoughts about the clinical case or aspects of the suit, often while the physician is trying to relax or sleep. Frequently this leads to insomnia. They may develop emotional numbing not just about the lawsuit but all areas of their life. They may go to a great deal of trouble to avoid any kind of reminder about the case or the lawsuit. They may have symptoms of increased arousal and an exaggerated “startle” response. They may feel anger; this frequently

comes out in the physician’s home life and hyper-vigilance at work. Possibly the main relationship to be victimized is that of the marital relationship. Often the spouse ends up carrying the greater part of the emotional burden; they are the one who bear the brunt of the results of lost sleep, irritability, the last minute cancellation of vacation plans and other intrusions on their marriage and family life. The litigation may go for long periods of time when nothing is happening and then there will be an intense amount of activity, such that the physician is unable to deal with the situation using suppression and denial. The coping mechanisms we recommend to physicians: First, take charge of your practice. Rather than taking time off for rest and reflections, many physicians under stress tend to work more and begin to cancel their days off. Instead, take some time off and realize the work will be there once the lawsuit is resolved. Second, pay attention to your personal relationships. Your family is upset about the lawsuit and concerned for you; being at least somewhat open, especially with your spouse or older children, allows them an opening to express their love and support and feel they are a part of the process of helping and healing. This is a good time to strengthen your spiritual or meditative life – it helps physicians of all faiths better cope with times of stress. Develop a life outside of medicine, pursue hobbies and interests and stop postponing enjoyment. Take time for yourself.

One of the most effective coping mechanisms is to become a member of a support group. The confidentiality of what happens in these groups is protected by law and physicians are able to share their feelings about

what they are experiencing without fear of it being discovered or the information being used against them. If you have an interest in joining or setting up a litigation support group, please contact me through the TMF.

Last, it is important to always remember we do survive these malpractice suits and our goal in the Tennessee Medical Foundation is to see that physicians do this with the least damage and with the most helpful lessons learned.

If you or a colleague can use the assistance of the PHP, please contact me at the address and phone number below. Our program is conducted in complete confidence and has over a 90-percent success rate in restoring physicians to their duties as healthcare professionals. +

*To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physician’s Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411, or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Center-view Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.*

