

# Physician Burnout – A Systems Problem Requiring a Systems Solution

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Physician burnout. What does this mean? Concepts such as exhaustion, wellness, mental, and emotional health are just some of the phrases that the term “burnout” conjures up in my mind.

My journey with this notion started in residency. I have always experienced an internal struggle managing my personal and professional life. Given our erratic work hours, it was a challenge to make sure I spent quality time with my husband, especially since he also

This starts with leadership. For me, this meant meetings with our senior leadership team as well as our medical executive board. It is imperative that these key leaders are on board with the importance of addressing physician burnout within an institution. All organizational change must have leadership support to be effective and buy in from senior leadership is essential if we are ever to enact the cultural change we desire. So, during these meetings, we worked towards aligning my goals for creating a culture of wellness within our institution with the values of our hospital

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has a demanding job requiring a fair amount of travel. This feeling only increased exponentially after the birth of my children and the increasing demands my husband experienced in his work. At the same time, busy shifts with large volumes and high acuity of patients were making me feel more emotionally drained. I had no mental or emotional energy to contribute to my family at home. This was a cycle that then affected my empathy for patients and my experience at work.

While personally dealing with these concerns, I began to think that maybe some of my colleagues were feeling the same way. The six months I spent researching the topic of physician burnout sparked my passion into seeing what I could do to create a culture of wellness within first my ED group, and now my hospital organization.

I started by working within my ED group. I took a data-driven approach to addressing wellness by creating interventions based on the results of semi-annual surveys. The goal of these interventions was to address the issues driving burnout and disengagement within my own section. There were many different concepts incorporated, including a biweekly “wellness email.”

After two years, I wanted to do more and expanded my focus on physician wellness to the hospital level. It is important to understand that burnout is a systemic issue that requires change on an institutional level. We need to work to change the system so we can address factors affecting quality, efficiency, and access to medical care as well as patient satisfaction and compliance. It is vital that we work toward creating a culture of wellness in our community to address those drivers of burnout we encounter every day and that it be a physician that advocates for this change for his/her colleagues.

leadership so we could work together. The feedback from these meetings held recently was positive and I am optimistic about our ability to create significant improvements in our organization regarding physician burnout.

As “wellness champions,” my partner and I are now working on taking a top down approach to enlist community and peer support via colleagues from multiple medical departments. By working together, we hope that innovative and creative solutions to attack the issues of burnout that are specific to our hospital will arise. With the support of leadership, I believe much can be accomplished to decrease burnout and create a wellness culture within our hospital.

One challenge I have encountered along the way is maintaining patience. As John Heywood famously said “Rome was not built in a day” and solving the broad problem of physician burnout does take more than a few weeks or months, no matter how passionate one is. Much ground work needs to be accomplished before attacking this issue head on and creating a culture of wellness within any organization is often a paradigm shift that requires years to complete.

It is an arduous road with many a speed bump and detour along the way. But it feels good knowing that with each step I take, I am one step closer to decreasing burnout, improving mental and emotional health and working towards a culture of wellness within my organization. ●

## References:

1. E.E. Frezza. “Moral Injury: The Pandemic for Physicians”. *Texas Medicine* March 2019, p7.