

Physician Burnout: The Untold Story

Being a physician can be one of the most taxing professions in today's world. The high pressure, high demand day-to-day can take a toll not just physically, but emotionally as well. The problem is, the medical world often values an attitude of "keep pressing on," which does not allow much room for rest or assistance, and when it does, physicians return to the same breakneck-paced, stressful world they took a break from.

This issue is causing burnout in physicians all over the country. The suicide rate among physicians is higher than any other professionals. The rate at which physicians leave the profession is greater than any other caregiving profession. It not only affects the doctors, but their patients as well, as this fatigue and stress can impair their ability to do their best work and care for the people entrusted to them well, not to mention their personal lives and families. Physician burnout is often characterized by family disintegration, mental health disorders and addiction.

It's not just the caregiving aspect of the profession that can be stressful, but the added responsibility of managing administrative, legal and compliance, financial and new technology duties. With each responsibility, the burden becomes heavier.

These alarming statistics have made physician burnout a much-researched, much-discussed issue today. Burnout is not just stress. It's an emotional injury to the soul with deep, wide-reaching effects on not only the physician but his or her family, friends and patients as well. Patient and employee satisfaction plummet when a physician is stretched thin and worn down.

But physicians are often seen as steady, calm, collected. They are to be the rocks on which worried and sick patients can count on, to be unshaken and to know what to do. They are expected to remain stoic and unemotional in the face of potentially crushing diagnoses or issues regarding the well-being of the practice.

Physicians, though, are human like the rest of us. They experience fear, stress, fatigue, worry, and all the other emotions that come with the territory of a high-pressure job. To pretend they do not is to exacerbate the issue.

Families of physicians know this first-hand. Physician burnout does not just affect patients and coworkers but loved ones as well. It can cause strain on relationships and division in marriages, not to mention a personal toll diminishing the joy in a physician's calling. The job quickly becomes not a privilege but a grind, and that is no place from which to serve

others well or enjoy life.

A number of health systems have been researching and implementing programs to combat this issue and support the well-being of their providers. FaithSearch Partners has joined with Trinity Health to be part of the solution.

In two upcoming articles we will explore what is not working and what is working in addressing the issue of physician well-being, and why; and then make some practical applications to differentiating stress from burnout in your own life and what you can do about it. A self-assessment regarding the driven personality will be provided as well. Most of us who are prone to burnout have little idea how vulnerable we really are. To be continued...