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9 Ways to Fight Burnout in Overworked Medical Staff



Emily Paulsen  February 7, 2020  5 min read

Overworked medical staff are at risk for burnout. Here are some ways to increase staff engagement and well-being.

The Triple Aim for optimizing healthcare by improving care and health outcomes has reduced costs, but it's also put extra strain on the healthcare system. A new report from the [National Academy of Medicine](#) (NAM) finds that changes to the way care is provided, documented and reimbursed have added to the demands on already-overworked medical staff, putting them at even higher risk for burnout. Thirty-five to 54% of clinicians and 45 to 60% of medical students and residents report symptoms of burnout, according to the NAM, and these feelings tend to trickle down from administrators and clinicians to all levels of healthcare workers.

Someone experiencing burnout faces feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low accomplishment. Signs include extreme fatigue, problems sleeping, irritability, hopelessness and high absenteeism. The [American](#)

Burnout among medical staff is associated with reduced patient satisfaction, poorer health outcomes and even increased medical costs, the exact opposite of what the Triple Aim is hoping to accomplish. The problem is so large that some, including the [Annals of Family Medicine](#), have suggested that the Triple Aim be expanded to include a fourth goal: improving the work life of clinicians and medical staff.

Defining Well-Being

Symptoms of burnout can be counteracted by feelings of well-being or an ability to decompress and find joy outside of work. However, overworked medical staff often carry their work stress with them outside the office, which can affect their overall emotional and physical health.

According to [Gallup](#), people who score high on the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index — which includes purpose, social support, financial security, community and physical health — are more likely to bounce back from illness and injury. They may also be less likely to get sick or injured in the first place and are less likely to look for another job.

However, only 6% of healthcare workers were found to be thriving with all five elements.

9 Ways to Support Your Staff

Clearly, healthcare organizations have their work cut out for them when addressing the needs of overworked medical staff. That said, there are many strategies you can use to help alleviate the problem. Here are nine ways to encourage staff well-being.

1. Don't Wait for Symptoms (or an Error)

In healthcare today, stress is a given. It's how staff deal with stress (or don't deal with it) that causes burnout. Still, 71% of respondents to an [Medical Group Management Association](#) poll said their practice doesn't have a staff engagement program in place to reduce provider and staff burnout.

Leaders should acknowledge the problem and encourage constructive stress management during staff meetings, training opportunities, annual reviews and more. This can create a positive work culture that gives overworked medical staff

We expect clinicians to find meaning in patient care, but it turns out that nonclinical staff also score highly on “activation,” or the amount of motivation or meaning they find in their work, according to the [Harvard Business Review](#). High activation often means greater engagement, which helps fight burnout. Help staff connect the dots between the work they do, whether it’s billing, cleaning, food service or direct patient care, with the quality care that’s being delivered to patients and the creation of a positive workplace for co-workers.

3. Check In With Your Staff

Some commonly cited causes of burnout in healthcare include lack of control, conflict with colleagues or with leadership, long hours, poorly designed technology, lack of time, lack of resources ... The list goes on. But you won’t know what’s going on with your staff until you check in with them. Several different tools are available to gauge staff well-being and burnout rates and help figure out the factors causing it, including the [Mini Z Burnout Survey](#) (developed by the American Medical Association) or the [MBI: Human Services Survey for Medical Personnel](#).

4. Encourage Teamwork and Team-Building

Team huddles, informal staff gatherings and meetings with the whole staff about problem-solving and quality improvement efforts all help create a “we’re all in this together” feeling.

5. Help Map Career Paths

People work best when they have something to look forward to. Talk to staff members about their career goals, then work with them to meet them.

6. Reduce Redundancy and Align Requirements

Clinicians and medical staff already have enough on their plates managing governmental requirements that don’t line up. Technology that was supposed to make life easier often ends up doing just the opposite if it doesn’t fit with practice workflow. When possible, make sure that internal policies and procedures and technology add-ons don’t add to the burden.

under stress can exacerbate burnout and job dissatisfaction for employees. Thankfully, the opposite is true as well: Positive feedback from patients can improve staff well-being and reduce burnout. According to [PatientEngagementHIT](#), staff who feel good about their jobs and their workplace are more likely to deliver world-class customer service. Coordinating efforts toward patient and staff satisfaction can turn a negative cycle into a positive one.

8. Support Stress Management

Flexible work hours, employee assistance programs and nonjudgmental communications can all go a long way to help.

9. Invite Open Communication

“How can I help?” Try asking this simple question, as the progressive medical director at the center of the TV drama “New Amsterdam” does when responding to staff frustrations. Questions like these indicate that you’re willing to listen to your staff’s concerns and their ideas, inviting productive open dialogue.

Practice Management



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Emily Paulsen writes about health and healthcare topics for consumers as well as healthcare professionals and administrators. Her special interests include patient education, health information technology, health disparities, workforce development, and improving the healthcare experience for patients and professionals alike. She has experience developing articles, fact sheets, toolkits, case studies, reports, research summaries, and continuing medical education materials. Her clients include trade publications, health organizations, non-profits, and government agencies.

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