

Stress Management for Healthcare Workers: Preventing Burnout

Burnout, also called compassion fatigue, may set in when healthcare workers become worn down by their work with individuals in need. Nurses and others are asked to balance numerous competing demands every day. Technology adds to patient safety but also to the workload.

Many critically ill patients have multiple pieces of buzzing, beeping equipment attached to them which must be consistently monitored. Healthcare workers are constantly asked to care for far sicker patients with shorter hospital stays, to cope with fewer staff, to do more work with fewer resources, and to do this well day after day.

Burnout occurs when healthcare workers are overwhelmed by the physical and emotional demands of their work.

Burnout is associated with situations where individuals feel overworked, underappreciated, confused about priorities, and besieged with responsibilities. Personality traits such as perfectionism and inability to set limits often contribute to compassion fatigue. Burnout doesn't usually occur suddenly, so if it can be identified at an early stage, helpful strategies can be implemented.

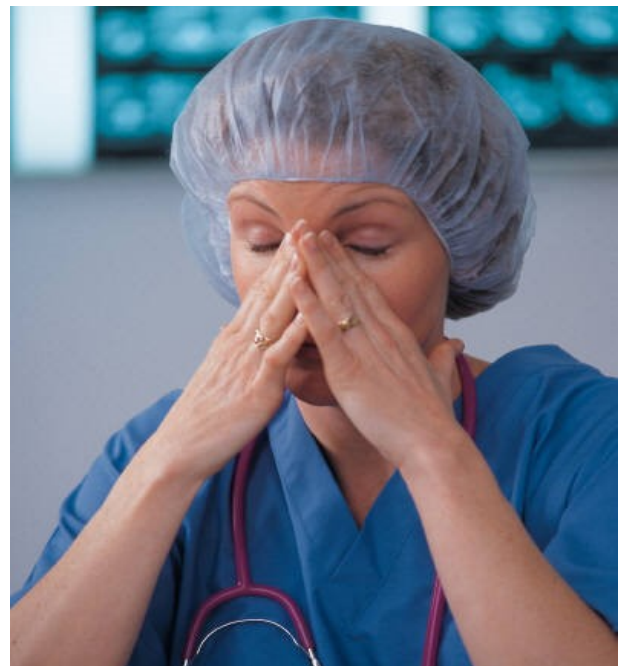
Initial signs of burnout include:

- Irritability
- Anxiety

- Lowered tolerance for frustration
- Decreased efficiency at work
- Difficulty relaxing

As burnout increases, a healthcare worker may experience:

- Sleep disturbances
 - Reluctance to go to work
 - Sense of dread regarding work
- Feeling of being overwhelmed
- Lack of sense of hope
- Increase in anger



- Lack of confidence in ability to do the job well
- Cynicism
- Depression
- Increased use of alcohol or other recreational drugs
- Increase in absences from work
- Decision to resign and/or leave the healthcare field

In the healthcare setting, it is impossible to avoid stress completely, but it IS possible to manage stress and avoid burnout. As a healthcare worker, it is imperative to monitor stress and work actively to limit it.

The following are strategies many healthcare workers find helpful for managing stress at work:

- Cultivate teamwork in your job. Good communication and support go a long way.
- When possible, take a short break to "recharge."
- Learn to pace yourself.
- Keep a sense of humor—laughter helps!
- Focus on the positive contributions you make to your patients.
- Assess your work environment; there may be a way to declutter, organize or prioritize.
- Educate your employer on the value of recognizing healthcare workers. When an organization holds healthcare providers in high esteem and solicits their input, employees feel empowered and valued.
- Join a professional healthcare organization to find ongoing opportunities for learning and support.

Managing stress outside the workplace is important too. It will help to:

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle: eat well and get enough sleep.
- Make time for adequate exercise.
- Initiate some decompression techniques: aromatherapy, meditation, soothing music, progressive muscle relaxation, mental imagery, and positive self-talk.
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol or other recreational drugs.
- Give yourself some "me time" to do exactly what you find most relaxing.
- Develop your support system in order to restore energy and feel appreciated.

Counselors who provide support to healthcare workers believe that one of the secrets to maintaining the energy you need to provide compassionate care lies in having a positive outlook on life in general.

Remember that your role as a healthcare worker gives you an opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of the patients you serve. By keeping yourself well, you can keep others well too!

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