

Physician heal thyself: tips to manage stress & burnouts among doctors in India

Introduction

The medical profession is considered one of the noblest professions in the world. Doctors/Health care providers go out of their way to ensure the good health of their patients. They spend long hours, work overtime, and even compromise their rest and social gatherings in order to be there for their patients. Indeed, this profession offers numerous privileges to the health care professionals but it also comes with negative consequences. Depression, burnouts, alarming stress levels and suicide are the most common issues being faced by doctors around the globe.¹ Health care professionals face high levels of stress which results in emotional exhaustion and burnouts. According to a survey, more than 20,000 physicians self-reported experiencing burnout.²

Stress, substance abuse, depression and increasing suicide rate are all the outcomes of burnout, when it is not properly dealt with. The situation is even worse in India. According to a report, 19.5% females and 12% males in the health care experience depression, this is even more prevalent among medical students as around 15 to 30% medical students screened positive for depression. Another study conducted by Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine showed that 14% of health care professionals are heavy smokers, 18% depend on antidepressants, and 21% drink alcohol in high volumes.³

Burnout is the main reason for these mental issues. The risk factors includes being obsessive about professional responsibilities, excessive workload, inadequate sleep, as well as exposure to patients in emergency departments and primary care. Difficult communications with patients and their family members having unrealistic expectations from health care professionals, as well as demands for increased productivity from health care system, and extra regulatory requirements by government are among the top risk factors for burnouts.⁴ When this is not dealt with, the burnout becomes severe, which leads to depression and other mental issues, and even suicide.

The burnout starts right from the medical college, when medical students are under pressure to do well and get better grades. Many students also experience high stress levels, anxiety, and depression when they are preparing for medical college's entrance exams.⁵ Right from that point their stress levels increase and go to disturbingly high levels when they reach professional life. In India, there have been cases of suicide among medical students when they are unable to handle the pressures or are afraid they will not fulfill their parents' unrealistic expectations.⁶

Suicide among medical students, doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals has now become unnerving with the increasing percentage of cases. It is alarming that the ones we depend on to cure us are themselves suffering from so many issues.⁷ The major reason behind this increasing numbers among health care professionals is the same as that behind the non-health care individuals, the stigma behind mental illnesses and suicide in India. Many schools, hospitals, and other organizations prefer the silent treatment towards the suicide of their students, colleagues, friends, and employees.⁸

Since mental illness and suicide are topics not talked about, there haven't been much done in order to prevent these issues among

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medical students, and health care professionals.⁹ There is a dire need to take initiatives and creates prevention programs in schools, colleges, hospitals and other organizations to help individuals deal with depression, stress levels and burnouts. People need to start talking about these issues and to understand that it is normal to get depressed and perfectly okay to seek help for mental problems.

The first thing that must be immediately implemented is burnout prevention plans. This is where other problems arise.¹⁰ It is essential that health care professionals and medical students realize that it is important to take time outs and break away from all the stress in order to stop them from burning out. Burnout affects your decision making abilities and make you prone to make mistakes which means that your patients can be at risk too.

Following are some tips that can help doctors in preventing burnout and lowering the stress levels:

- i. Have regular time offs or vacation time every year. When you unplug from the clinical stress and responsibilities, you get time to relax and recharge yourself, both physically and mentally.
- ii. Be more active. Don't underestimate the power of regular exercise. Exercising everyday has been linked with decreasing the levels of stress and depression.¹¹ It also keeps your focus on the physical activity you are doing which means you tune off the thoughts of work, responsibilities and patients, giving your mind a rest.
- iii. Surround yourself with supportive and positive individuals. It is important to have people in your life who listen to you and can help you ease out your stress. Supportive loved ones can do wonders for your peace of mind and can even spot early signs that you are about to experience a burnout which can lead to early intervention.
- iv. Healthy diet is crucial for your mental and physical wellness. Aside from exercise, clean eating can assist in preventing burnouts. It is best to avoid or limit your consumption of alcohol and sugars which will also decrease risk of depression and lower your stress levels.¹² Plan your meals beforehand so to avoid unhealthy eating.

Starting as medical students, becoming interns or residents, and then full time physicians, this journey is certainly not an easy feat and brings with itself plenty of struggles and hurdles. Aside from that, health care professionals also have the responsibility of caring for their patients which can lead to increased stress levels and exhaustion. While health care professionals are well respected, have job security, and other privileges, burnouts, mental health issues, and suicide are also major factors in their lives. It is essential that appropriate measures are taken by relevant authorities to help prevent these issues so that the medical professionals can continue providing excellent care to their patients. In extreme cases (such as emergency physicians etc), career change/alternative medical pathways are a reasonable consideration for physicians to manage burnout and avoid stress/suicidal considerations among doctors.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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