



10 Tips to
DEAL WITH STRESS



Stress is inherent in medicine.

Our world is changing and there is rapid unprecedented change in health care. Being a physician is rewarding but it can also be physically difficult and psychologically demanding.

Stress can be a normal and natural response. It does not mean that we are weak or vulnerable, or that we cannot do our job. It just means that we are human. Stress can be useful; it helps to keep us going or to maintain a sense of purpose. So, feeling stress is fine. What's important is how we manage that stress.

Burnout is an epidemic hiding in plain sight.

Studies show that up to 50% of physicians are experiencing signs and symptoms of burnout. Burnout is chronic overstress. It is a distinct work-related syndrome, and is more likely to occur in professions that involve caring for others, and in workplaces where the demands exceed the resources. It is little wonder that, in medicine, we are vulnerable to burnout. While burnout is not a psychiatric diagnosis, it can lead to serious consequences.

It is worth making time to look for early signs of stress, in ourselves, as well as in those around us, so we can catch and address it early. These can include:

1. Increase in physical problems and illnesses.
2. More problems with relationships.
3. Increase in negative thoughts and feelings.
4. Significant increase in bad habits.
5. Exhaustion.

There are three main drivers of burnout: factors related to the individual physician, factors inherent in the culture of medicine, and factors dealing with the system of healthcare in which we practice. As leaders in medicine, we need to address all of these to effectively address burnout.

**Even the healthiest and strongest of us can become unhealthy in an unhealthy environment.
None of us is immune.**



10 TIPS TO DEAL WITH STRESS

The number one cause of stress, regardless of the cause, is a sense of lack of control. We perceive that in this situation, we have no choice, and feel trapped.

If this is the number one cause of stress, then the number one skill in dealing with stress is to challenge this perception, and to regain a sense of control.


Our share of the role in the stressful situation is usually very small, perhaps 2% of the entire situation. We think logically, and so focus on the bulk of the problem, the 98% that is not about us. Yet, control is an illusion; we have no control of anything outside of ourselves.

Thus, we appropriately perceive that we have no control. We need to remember that our 2% is the part that we have 100% control over, and identify and focus on this. This includes our thoughts, hopes, wishes, needs, expectations of our self and of others, weaknesses, strengths, reactions, skills, expertise, education – the responsibility of this part becomes our strength!

Keeping Stress Positive – Specific Strategies

To keep our stress positive, we need to identify what individual physicians can do to support their own wellness, as well as what the healthcare system must do to support the wellness of their physicians.

While changing the healthcare system to better support the physicians working within it will take time, there are some strategies that we can implement immediately to ensure that we take as good care of ourselves as we do of others. As physician leaders, modelling this behavior helps to set a positive example and create a psychologically safe working environment.

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- 1 Take care of yourself first.** As we hear in the airplane safety demonstrations, we are no good to anyone else if we pass out. Self care is not a luxury, but an investment that allows you to be more available to those who rely on you. This includes regular exercise, proper nutrition, having a family doctor, and regular medical checkups.
 - 2 Time management.** Organize your day and activities, set priorities, plan ahead, and delegate. Learn to say no. Try not to take your work home.
 - 3 Take regular time off.** Plan to have regular holidays, and weekly breaks, using the Tarzan Rule, where you do not end one without booking another one (just as Tarzan does with vines as he is swinging). Do not wait for a crisis to force it. Look for unplanned breaks in your day, and enjoy them as gifts of time, instead of getting irritated and frustrated.
 - 4 Use support systems.** Surround yourself with people who are good for you - a good friend, a mentor, a loving pet.
 - 5 Share your stories.** Reach out to people, and get support when you need it. While it seems that everyone else is coping well, you are not alone in our difficulties.
 - 6 Laugh more often and be positive.** Humour has therapeutic benefits. Children laugh over 500 times a day; however, by adulthood, we are down to 5-15 laughs daily. Look for humour in your day, laugh, and enjoy. Add fun to work.
 - 7 Relax.** Try out different relaxation techniques or meditation. Practice daily, for 15-20 minutes.



Learn to waste time. Put aside time when you do not have to be responsible for anyone or anything. Take a break, do nothing you have to do.



Create a financial plan. Money is the second key factor that prevents us from making a positive change to reduce stress. Plan your finances, so this is not a barrier.



Let go of your guilt. Guilt is the main reason why professionals do not do the things that are good for them. We feel highly responsible, work compulsively, and feel guilt if we do not meet these presumed responsibilities all the time. Usually, what we are considering doing is reasonable, legal, moral, ethical, possible, healthy and is the very thing that we should do!

We know that healthy physicians lead to healthy patients and healthy communities.

Our profession is ripe with rich and rewarding possibilities. It is worth investing the time and thought necessary to minimize the inherent stress and to maximize this potential.

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