

Norcross MD Advocacy

Miles Tobitt

Burnout Among Physicians: Developing Resilience for Future Medical Heroes



Burnout?

As kids, we read comic books and watch movies of superheroes saving the world. Their qualities of selflessness and unyielding perseverance motivate us to bring out our own best characteristics and assets to help the world. These heroes exist in the world, as a matter of fact, but they don't all wear capes and have a big red "S" on their chest.

The physicians of our society not only sacrifice years of

their lives to schooling and proper education required to help make a difference in their field, but they also work closely with those in need and have otherworldly selflessness in giving their all to making sure they make that difference in the world. While these people may seem invincible like the superheroes we read about in comic-books, they're still human. The responsibilities that are put on by their occupations and work they do can be substantial burdens to bear. Too much weight or too long carrying this around can lead to what is called workplace burnout.

Workplace burnout, while a hard-hitting and very present issue among physicians, is not impossible to overcome or avoid altogether. There are several ways that not only current physicians can conquer workplace burnout, but aspiring physicians and workers of any occupation can as well. While we often view the physicians of the world as superheroes, there are ways to truly emulate the name *Man of Steel*.

The Arch Nemesis: Workplace Burnout, A Deeper Dive

Burnout in the workplace, particularly among physicians, has been on the rise over the last several years. When the COVID-19 Pandemic sent everyone to work from home, this sparked a whole new wave of this problem.

The pandemic was a dramatically new experience for everyone. Physicians working in the medical field had to quickly change their system of duties when sent to work from home. Many physicians also benefit from interacting with their patients. The sudden change to total isolation from the physical interactions they had become accustomed to led to many physicians reporting severe senses of loneliness and anxiety during the pandemic. For many, being able to work closely with these patients and getting to know them and building those relationships had been a great relief from the crunch of responsibilities that come with being a real life superhero. Losing that would account for that dramatic rise in reports of loneliness and anxiety among physicians. Since returning to working face-to-face with patients, this does not deprive from the severity of the stress that comes with putting on that cape day in and day out.

Stressors around the workplace such as **overwhelming workloads**, feelings of **guilt** or **helplessness** when a patient's conditions do not improve, or even the social aspects of the job including **balancing saving the world and friendships, marriage, familial bonds, etc.** Being Superman or Superwoman in the real world comes with the responsibility of taking on that role every day. Having to work through those stressors on a daily basis can build up to the point of **burnout**.

Burnout is a crucial challenge among physicians. The build-up of these stressors and the result of burnout may lead to many things, ranging from **decrease in workplace performance and efficiency** to the development or worsening of certain mental challenges like **anxiety, depression, fatigue, and worsened sleep quality**.



While burnout is a difficult thing that most physicians will likely experience at some point in their career, there are ways to overcome burnout and even avoid it entirely. The most effective way in doing so is building resilience.

A Physician's Sidekick: Resilience is your Greatest Ally

Resilience is defined as *the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties*. The difficulties that physicians face in their everyday work lives requires some level of this mental toughness. Unfortunately, unlike Superman, most people are not born with the resilience required to work as a physician. Striving to

become a physician and wanting to be in those fields already says a lot about a person's character, and lots of those people have certain characteristics that help them develop strong resilience. Most everyone, to some extent, must develop their mental toughness to be able to overcome and hopefully avoid workplace burnout.

People who are born with good resilience and mental toughness tend to exhibit stronger characteristics of **determination, perseverance, and dedication**. Stronger characteristics that would help reduce the effects or presence of burnout in physicians would be those with **greater self awareness**. Those with greater self awareness are inclined to take better care of themselves when they're able to listen to their body and their mind and give themselves the time and care they need to deal with the everyday stressors of being a physician. While some are lucky to be born with heightened exhibitions of these traits, they can also be trained and developed throughout a person's life as well.

There are plenty of things a person can practice to develop their superpower of resilience. Writer and editor Whitney Hopler outlined this in a great way when she said, "Stress is an unavoidable part of life. If we **respond positively to stressful situations**, we can learn and grow in ways that wouldn't be possible otherwise. But too much stress can harm our well-being in many ways – from causing physical illness to overwhelming us mentally." To couple with this idea, famed endocrinologist Hans Selye (1907-1982) detailed this idea similarly when he said, "Adopting the **right attitude** can convert a **negative stress into a positive one**." Both Selye and Hopler address very similar strategies when overcoming stressful situations and developing resiliency. The idea is that resilience is a mental attitude, that negative stressors can be rearranged into positive stressors that can become motivations, inspirations, etc. to push physicians in their daily work.



Other strategies in developing resilience physiologically might include **better sleep schedule, eating healthy, exercise, etc.** Mentally, outside of positive affirmations and reframing your stressors, the big thing that is recommended to overcoming workplace burnout is **talking to someone.** As human beings, we all benefit from connecting emotionally with people. As social creatures, being able to open up to a **friend, family member, or therapist** are all valuable ways to relieve some of those stressors that people have to deal with, particularly physicians. Knowing that there are people out there who are supportive and understanding and there for you when you need them can help alleviate the pressures and difficulties that come with being a real life superhero. This can **help conquer those mental challenges** that workplace burnout can bring about such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, etc.



Heroes need Heroes too

While physicians often are living examples of the qualities that we admire comic book superheroes for, they're still human just like everyone else. The heroes that operate in clinics, hospitals, and everywhere else they can save the world need support too. Workplace burnout is present in many occupations but most severely in the physician field. For how much they give to their patients and the

community around them, they're more than deserving and in need of that support. **Norcross MD Advocacy** stands for the need to provide physicians with more resources and opportunities to avoid workplace burnout. Working to help physicians in all fields develop stronger resilience to continue to be the heroes that our world needs.

Next time you meet with a physician, imagine that cape on their back and the big red "S" on their chest. While even physicians are not invulnerable, they inspire those around them to be better versions of themselves for their selflessness and dedication to their work and patients. We work tirelessly to make sure that more and more physicians are able to receive the same support and care that they give their patients every single day.

Further resource links:

Kumar, S. (2016, June 30). *Burnout and doctors: Prevalence, prevention and intervention*. Healthcare (Basel, Switzerland). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5041038/>

Learn how to build resilience every day, one day at a time. Newport Institute. (2023, April 28). https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/resilience-toolkit/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=NI_performancemax&utm_term=&kpid=go_cmp-17672242732_adg-ad-dev-c-ext-prd-&gclid=CjwKCAjwv8qkBhAnEiwAkY-ahvSHECfYSnIYjhpqNkiLPU5ATNZtYNuR8w0TN3AJNPOFxB1N2fRhxoCCO8QAvD_BwE

How to create a culture of resilience - indeed. (n.d.). <https://au.indeed.com/lead/create-culture-of-resilience>

How to build emotional resilience instead of making New Year's resolutions. Newport Institute. (2023a, January 4). https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/build-resilience/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=NI_performancemax&utm_term=&kpid=go_cmp-17672242732_adg-ad-dev-c-ext-prd-&gclid=Cj0KCOjw1_SkBhDwARIsANbGpFuc5ciM-1cBzQwG2XzgO0LsADiZy9wDLdqVrM8bp9ErUIGPlgqRSGgaAmQAEALw_wcB