



Physicians and Stress – highlights and preventions

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“Physicians are subject to stress and frustration”; it is a global problem. Physicians’ frustration and dissatisfaction are not with the core concepts of the discipline, or solely with complaints about low reimbursement, or even with hassles related to managed care. They stem from the economic system and its encroachment on the patient-doctor relationship. Additionally, several job related stresses increase the challenges to continue enjoying medicine from the first time we put on a lab coat.

In 1999, family physicians conducted 35 million visits, more than any other specialty (1), and in 2000 family practice had more residency programs than any other specialty (2). Family physicians, as well as other specialty physicians, are subjected to daily stresses and frustrations, as they try to overcome job related issues and an ever changing health care system. (3,4,5,6).

Physicians initially work hard to pay their medical school fees. Afterwards, they have to manage the increasing cost of medical practice. They have to maintain a hard work schedule to afford the rather expensive life style they have created as compensation for family members for their continued absences. Finally, family physicians are burdened by the responsibility of supporting their children in having a less burdened professional career. Our profession might be considered neither among the best jobs, nor the most stressful jobs of the 21st century. However, our job has lots of demands; it deals with health and life standards. It’s a job that helps people and entails several stressful impacts.

Sources of Stress and Frustration in our Profession:

- 1 - The constant changing nature of managed care as well as the growing governmental and insurance companies intrusion into the practice of our profession. (4)
- 2 - Constant expectation to limit cost and provision of affordable rather than ideal services. This is more noticed with work on salaried basis. (4,5)
- 3 - Continuous expectation to update medical knowledge, and provide high quality care. (4)
- 4 - Progressive increase in practice costs and keeping up with professional demands. (6)
- 5 - Patients and society continue to be strongly ambivalent about physicians: patients expect us to be always available and ready to listen to their concerns regardless of our state of mind, mood, or physical satiety. (4,5)
- 6 - “We are always expected to be infallible in diagnosis and treatment”. Moreover, we are required to be models of virtuous behavior in our communities. (4,5)

Signs and Symptoms of Physicians’ Stress:

James Turnbull (4) reported that evidence is usually more obvious to others and specifically in a doctor’s family that becomes repository of his/her signs of stress. Not infrequently, physicians ignore their families and their emotional needs. The following are potential signs and symptoms in stressed or frustrated physicians:

- 1 - Difficulty in making diagnosis.
- 2 - Neglect of patients as evidenced by poor management, not responding to phone calls, and increased reports of sick days off.
- 3 - “Always on the run”. This hurried life style adds irritability to stressed physicians with less time for personal relaxation.
- 4 - Avoiding friends and events that were once enjoyed.
- 5 - Decreased threshold towards irritability with family members, and usually physicians’ office staff suffer first.
- 6 - Alcoholism and drug abuse.

Prevention:

Several causes of physicians' stress and frustration can be avoided by taking care of ourselves. The following are important suggestions often listed in literature and proven highly effective to prevent the worst effect of stress:

- 1 - Maintain a sense of optimism. Some of your colleagues might work as optimistic role models. Try to ask their help to change. (4)
- 2 - Work on your friendships. Be an active listener, and don't neglect friends you've once had for years. (4)
- 3 - Plan for retirement. It's important to think how to spend your retirement years. Planning and looking for retirement should not make you postpone enjoying the best of your days waiting for the date to come. (4)
- 4 - Look after your own health. Apply your own medicine on your self. Avoid smoking or excess alcohol intake, preserve good weight, exercise regularly, get 7-8 hours sleep at night and three meals/day including breakfast etc. We need to apply what we know. (4)
- 5 - Keep a sense of humor: "Humor is an important element of healthy life". Medicine is a serious business yet adding a dose of humor to our practice might be all that is needed when things get tough. (4,5,7,9)
- 6 - Keep a life balance between professional stresses and your true values. As professional healers, we are highly important. (8) Jennifer Bush included tips from doctors to doctors for maintaining life balance and getting more satisfaction from carrying out their jobs up to their own expectations:
 - A - Try not to be always too efficient: Listen at least to two patients daily. This will add to personal satisfaction, and build better rapport with your patients.
 - B - At the end of the day, take a lesson from the things that bugged you during that day and leave it at your office.
 - C - Sometimes, or occasionally, say: This is not going to be done today. Work on accepting it, yet never get the habit of it.
 - D - Make use of your scheduled days off, and never regret not working on those days. Such opportunities can't be just materialized through equating it with lost opportunity to get more money.
 - E - Spend more time with your family to know what they need more of you. It might be something different than you think. Try not to show your

tiredness and frustrations always to them. Family members might share some responsibility yet are not to be blamed.

F - Socialize out with colleagues, yet avoid talking about medical related issues.

G - Eat at least one meal with your family.

H - Do something you like: If medicine does not fulfill your expectation at certain time and/or needs, look to explore other professional aspects in your domain i.e., research work, academic or other endeavors. Any which way can give you self-satisfaction, and might be a way out.

I - Finally get help if needed; everyone needs help at some point in time.

Conclusions/Summary:

Overstressed physicians need to minimize efforts and avoid tasks that drain their energy, and invest in work that is more rewarding. They need to realize that they are vulnerable and might need help at times. Family physicians may be limited about what can be done about health care environment, but they can change their outlook toward things, life and self. (4) All that is required is commitment through several ways of approaching frustrating situations.

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