

Physician Stress and Burnout: What Can We Do?

By Alan H. Rosenstein, MD, MBA

In this article...

A survey of more than 2,000 physicians finds that stress and burnout are on the rise, but there are some steps doctors can take to reduce the problems.

There is a growing amount of literature attesting to the increasing amount of stress and burnout and its negative impact on physician lives and performance.¹⁻¹⁴ It occurs more frequently than admitted, is frequently ignored or accepted as part of doing business, and there's an overriding rationalization and resistance to seeking or accepting help.

It's a complex issue involving a variety of different factors including genetics, upbringing, and other life experiences later accentuated by the hardships of medical training and the realities of today's medical environment. Something needs to be done, but are we doing it?

A recent survey conducted by Physician Wellness Services in Minneapolis, MN, and Cejka Search of St. Louis, MO, provides additional insight into the problem.¹⁵ The survey was completed in October 2011. Responses were received from over 2,000 practicing physicians nationwide across multiple specialties. Nearly two-thirds of the physicians identified themselves as being more stressed or burned out compared to three years ago.

- The three top external factors given as contributing to their stress included the overall economy (52 percent), health care reform (46 percent), and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' (CMS) policies (41 percent). (See Figure 1.)
- The top three work-related factors contributing to stress were paperwork and administrative demands (40 percent), too many hours of work (33 percent), and on-call schedules and expectations (26 percent). (See Figure 2.)

- The top three personal life-related factors contributing to stress or burnout included not enough time to relax (53 percent), not enough time to exercise or to participate in wellness activities (51 percent) and concerns about work-life balance (45 percent). (See Figure 3.)
- The top three work-related impacts of stress or burnout were lower job satisfaction (51 percent), desire to work fewer hours (41 percent) and desire to retire early (30 percent). Twenty eight percent expressed a desire to change careers, 22 percent a desire to switch jobs and 16 percent a desire to switch to a new practice (See Figure 4.)
- The top three personal life-related impacts of stress or burnout were feeling tired (41 percent), sleep problems (37 percent), and general feelings of irritability and moodiness (34 percent). (See Figure 5.)

When asked if they have ever left a practice due to stress or burnout, 14 percent said yes. When physicians were asked what they were doing to combat stress, the three top answers were trying to exercise (63 percent), trying to spend more time with family and friends (57 percent), and trying to take more vacation time (48 percent).

When asked what they would like their organizations to do to help them address their stress and burnout, the top answers were to provide more ancillary support to help with administrative matters (63 percent), provide on-site exercise facilities and classes (39 percent), provide wellness initiatives (28 percent), provide workshops on stress/burnout management (24 percent), provide concierge services (20 percent), and provide coaching or mentoring resources (19 percent). (See Figure 6.)

When asked if their organization currently provided support for stress or burnout, only 16 percent said yes. For those organizations that did provide resources, the most common initiatives included wellness services (31 percent), workshops and education (29 percent), on-site exercise facilities (19 percent), an Employee Assistance Program (EAP),

Figure 1:
External Factors Causing Stress or Burnout



counseling or behavioral health services (15 percent) (See Figure 7.)

Overall these were rather disturbing results that indicate that little is being done to help physicians. On the positive side, there's tremendous opportunity for improvement. What can we do?

Raise awareness

The first step is to raise levels of awareness of how prevalent and serious an issue this is. Organizations need to recognize the negative impact of stress and burnout on physicians and provide appropriate programs and support to enhance physical and mental well being to restore satisfaction, energy and performance.

Physicians need to recognize that they are working under increasing amounts of stress, acknowledge it and take steps to mitigate its effect. So where do you begin?

There are many deep-seated factors, including age, gender, family and life experiences, culture, and ethnicity, that shape a person's personality, values and behavioral styles. Many of these factors may affect the way an individual reacts to stress and may need to be addressed through appropriate counseling or behavioral modification programs.¹⁶

A second contributing factor is the intensity and duress of medical training. Much of the stress and burnout begins here. Many medical schools and training programs are beginning to address this issue through supportive

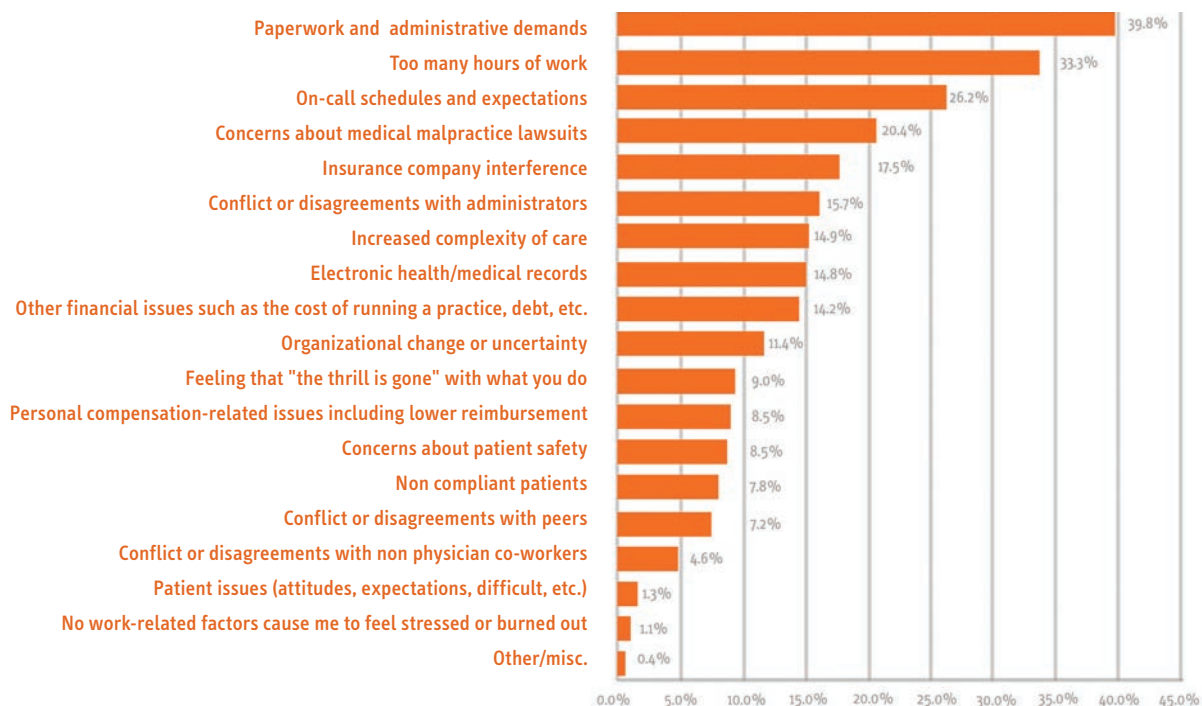
programs or reduced work-hour commitments to encourage and support time for relaxation and recuperation. Now what can we do for the practicing physician?

Offer support

Looking at the first series of results, one category of stresses includes the external environment. There is probably little that we can do to affect concerns about the overall economy.

Issues related to health care reform and CMS policies are left in the hands of governmental politics, lobbyists and influential medical societies. On the other hand, there is definitely room for opportunity to address work-related stress factors.

Figure 2: Work-Related Factors Causing Stress or Burnout



Providing support services to help with completion and documentation of administrative tasks and adjusting call schedules will allow more free time for physicians to do what they want to do, which is to treat patients.

In regard to personal life-related factors, most physicians recognize the need to relax, take time off, spend time with family, exercise and enjoy recreational activities, but don't make it a priority to set aside enough time for this to occur.

Physicians need to be able to say no and organizations need to recognize the importance of assessing staff capacity and not piling on additional tasks and responsibilities without letting some other tasks go.

Allowing increased work-life balance will lead to greater job satisfaction, and increased productivity and efficiency, and also ameliorate the tiredness, anxiety and depression-related symptoms that can lead to medical errors and other negative outcomes of care.

So who is going to take responsibility to make this happen? Ideally it would be the physicians. They need to recognize that they are under stress, do something about it, prioritize time commitments to promote a positive work-life balance, and be receptive to receiving outside help and assistance from family, friends, peers and organizational staffers. Given the results from the present survey, it's just not working the way it should.

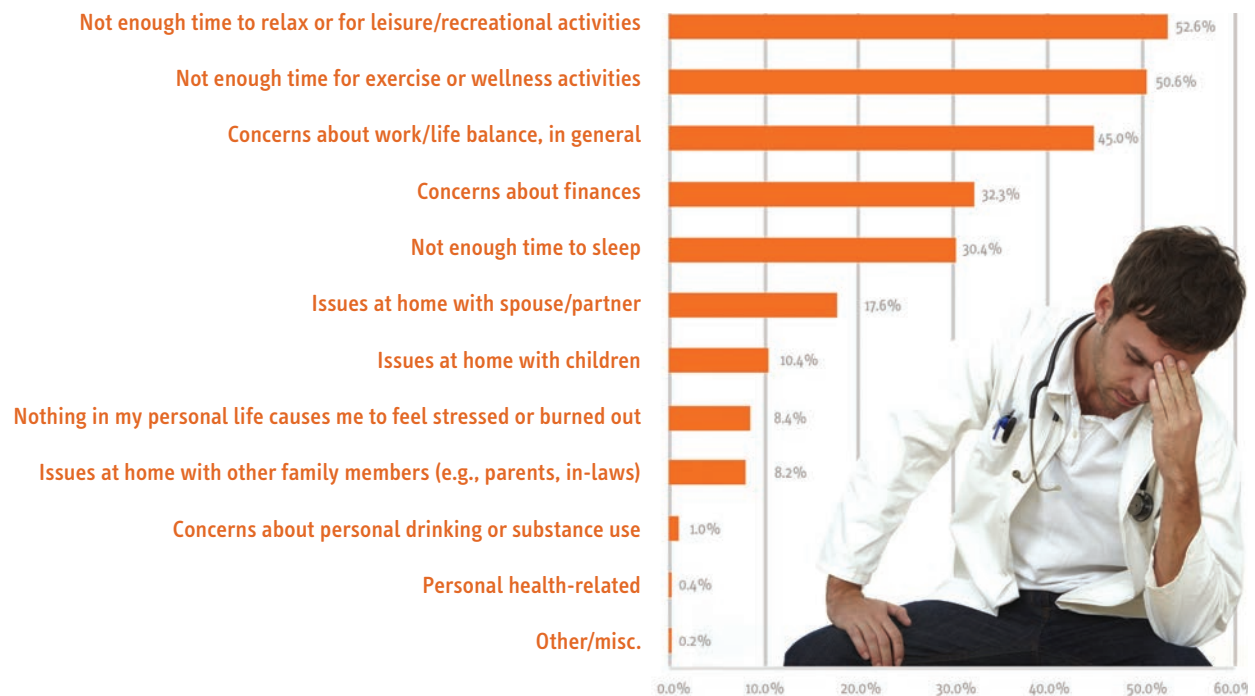
Be proactive

A second resource is the proactive organization. One of the most disturbing results from the survey is that only 16 percent of the physicians felt that their organization was providing the support they need. Support can come from many different directions.

The first issue is to address time demands and capacity. Using nurse practitioners or physician assistants can make a significant impact in reducing some of the clinical load. Administrative support staffers can help reduce the burden of non clinical responsibilities and administrative needs.

Being conscious and creative in addressing time commitments and on-call requirements will help reduce

Figure 3: Personal Life-Related Factors Causing Stress or Burnout



work loads and help physicians carve out time for wellness-related activities during the day as a means of relieving stress.

Physicians have also requested that the organization provide exercise facilities on-site. These facilities must be open and available to accommodate the demanding time schedule of the physician. It would be helpful to block out specific times on the physician schedule to make it happen.

Emotional support is a key issue. The goal is to recognize that physicians are under stress and make it easy, convenient and comfortable for them to seek help in a confidential environment. Listen to what they have to say and provide advice and resources to help them better adjust

to their surroundings. Providing resources to help physicians adjust to the stresses in their environment will go a long way toward improving overall satisfaction, energy, engagement, productivity and care efficiency.

Services can include providing programs on stress management, time management and business management. Many of these programs can be offered through a physician wellness committee, human resources or medical staff services.

Individualized services through a coaching or mentoring program can be particularly successful by allowing one-on-one interaction providing more personalized recommendations. These services can be provided internally or through contracted services

such as a physician EAP. In some cases the situation may require more comprehensive counseling, therapy or recommendations for behavioral modification services.

Physicians have dedicated their lives to the practice of medicine. They work hard and sacrifice deeply in their quest to provide the best patient care. Economic realities have added additional stresses that amplify the business side of medicine, which many physicians feel are an encroachment on their practices.

Some grin and bear it, some change practice models, some retire early and some change careers. Physicians are a precious resource that may soon be in short supply. We need to do all we can to help them.

Figure 4: Work-Related Impacts of Stress or Burnout

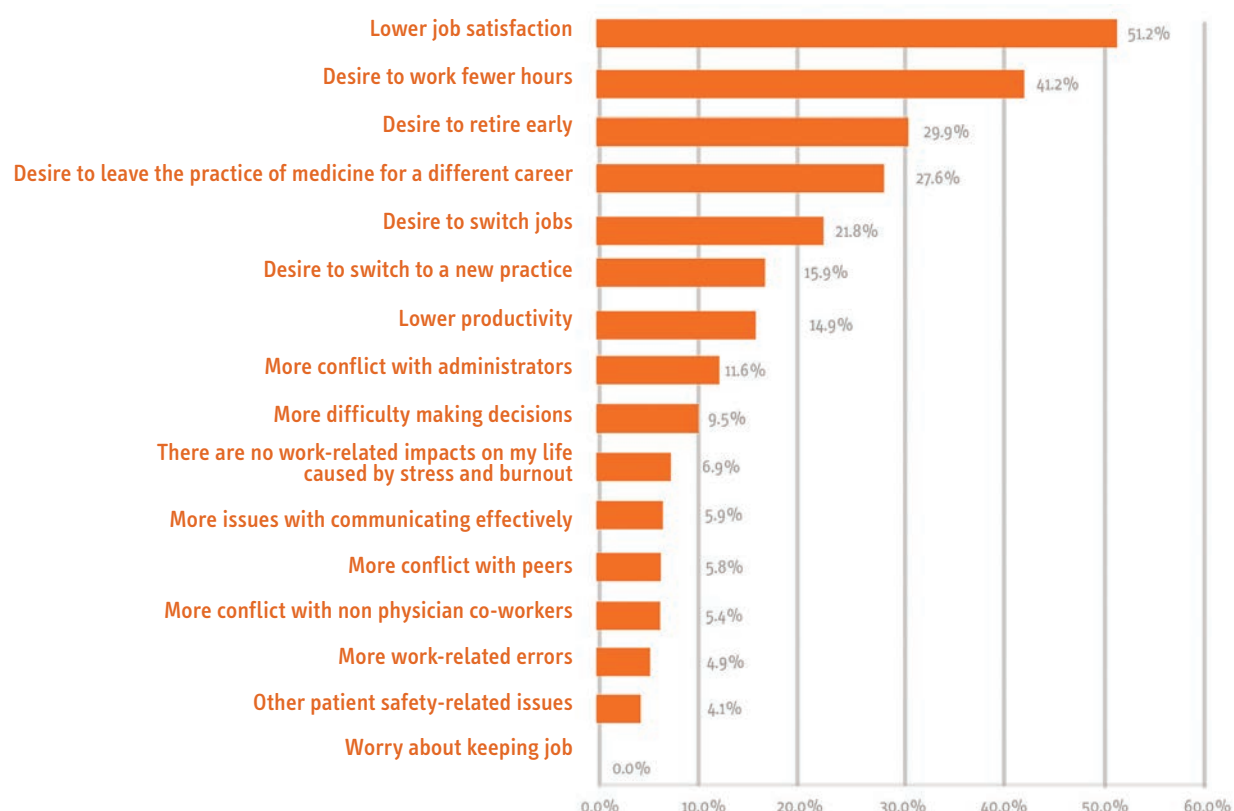
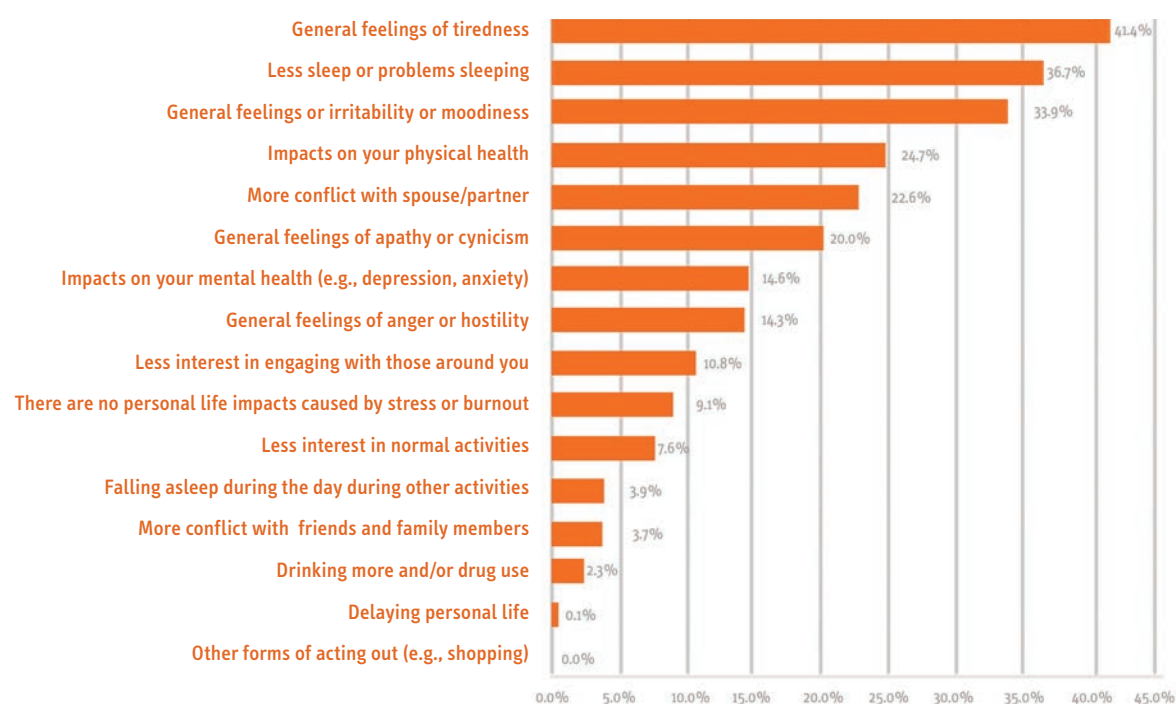
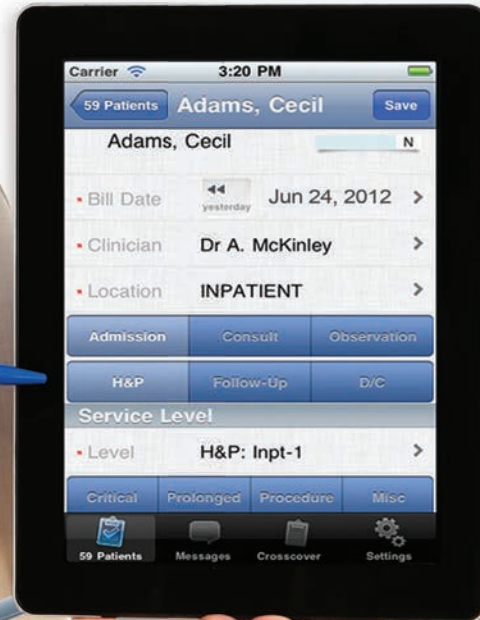


Figure 5: Personal Life-Related Impacts of Stress or Burnout





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Figure 6: Desired Organization-Sponsored Assistance with Stress or Burnout

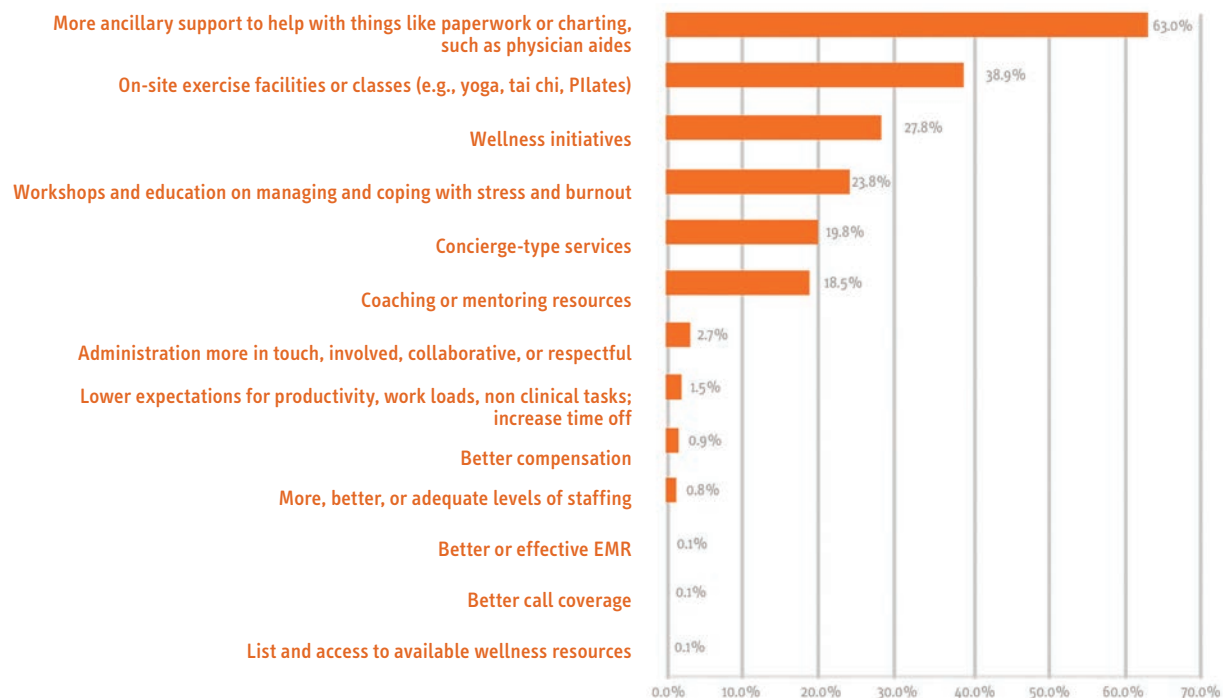


Figure 7: Current Organization-Sponsored Assistance with Stress or Burnout



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