

a VITAL WorkLife article

Investing in Physician Well Being: The Smart Business Choice

By Mitch Best, CEO of VITAL WorkLife



Coming up in the article:

- The Costs of Burnout
- Physicians Who Feel Cared About Are Highly Engaged
- A Culture of Care for the Whole Physician
- The Business Case: One Leader's View For the Whole Physician

Containing costs is a huge priority for healthcare leaders. Yet one of the wisest investments you can make is in the well being of your physicians.

Let's be clear. While "wellness" refers to the physical health of clinicians, "well being" is how they feel about medicine, the work they do, their professional progress, their finances, their home life and much more. Physical health is certainly an important contributor to well being, but it's far from the whole story.

Supporting well being in these other areas is a strategic investment that reflects the respect you have for your physicians and your sense of moral obligation to them. It also shows you are mindful of your fiscal responsibilities. Its business benefits are excellent and there are many kinds of effective resources you can offer to meet both moral and fiscal obligations.

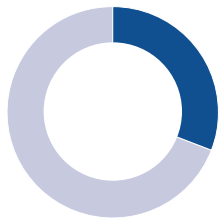
The Costs of Burnout

The bottom line of the business case is this: When physicians struggle with their own well being, it has a significant negative financial impact on the organization. Poor physician well being can drive:

1) Turnover.

Abundant research shows that burnout is a major driver of turnover. In a survey by VITAL WorkLife,¹ 31 percent of stressed physicians indicated a desire to retire early, 18 percent responded they desired to switch jobs and 29 percent reported a desire to leave the practice of medicine altogether. Turnover results in substantial direct and indirect costs.

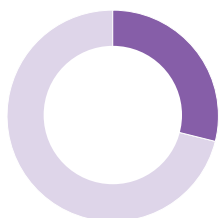
STRESSED PHYSICIANS



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29%
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- **Direct costs** are for recruitment, including recruitment agency fees, advertisements and interview costs. It is estimated that in 2021, the cost to recruit a single physician candidate will cost up to \$250,000 when factoring in marketing, sign-on bonuses, relocation stipend and other expenses.² The American Medical Association provides an interactive tool to calculate the direct costs of burnout due to physician turnover at: <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward/interactive/16830405>

ESTIMATED COSTS OF RECRUITMENT



\$250,000

to recruit a single physician in 2021, when factoring in marketing, signing bonuses, relocation stipends and other expenses

- **Indirect costs** include revenue lost during recruitment and onboarding, and the time it takes for a new physician to reach maximum efficiency. Add these up and studies show the cost to replace a physician is two to three times the physician's annual salary³

The total lost revenue for one of the organizations surveyed by Association of Staff Physician Recruiters was \$990,000 per full-time-equivalent physician. A recent report by Atrius Health estimated that it cost them \$500,000 to \$1 million to replace a physician⁴. And when it comes to replacing procedurally-based subspecialty physicians, the price tag is likely to be much higher.

In addition, with a physician shortage growing in many specialties, recruitment and retention are likely to become more difficult and even more expensive.

1. A VITAL WorkLife Report, "2015 Physician Stress and Burnout Report."
<https://info.vitalworklife.com/stress>

2. <https://www.mgma.com/resources/human-resources/on-the-lookout-a-tight-physician-market-in-a-post>

3. <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward/module/2702510>

4. <https://www.hfma.org/topics/article/60483.html>

2) Decreased productivity

Physicians who are struggling tend to use various coping tactics such as reducing the number of hours they work. This can help them but hurt the organization's fiscal profile. In a study by Mayo Clinic⁵ each one-point decrease in professional satisfaction (on a five-point scale) was associated with a 30 percent to 50 percent increase in the likelihood that physicians would reduce their work effort in the next 24 months.

As a healthcare administrator, your fixed costs are high and your margins are narrow; even a one or two percent decrease in productivity can have major effects on your bottom line.

3) Reduced quality, safety and patient satisfaction

Physicians who are working below their level of competence because of stress or burnout may not have the focus and/or concentration they need to be at the top of their game. This can affect their interactions with colleagues and patients, as well as their decision-

making abilities which can cause serious downstream issues. Medical errors, patient dissatisfaction, increased malpractice lawsuits and the additional burden on other staff members who pick up the slack for physicians who cut hours is often the result. Other possible problems include decreased care team morale and teamwork (and subsequent declines in patient safety), failure to explain treatment procedures and answer patients' questions, poor prescribing habits and more⁶.

The pressures that physicians are under, whether dealing with a pandemic or not, are formidable. The National Academy of Medicine's assessment, presented as an infographic titled "Factors Affecting Clinician Well-Being and Resilience," lays out 49 variables, ranging from social issues like the expectations patients have of physician performance and organizational factors like workload and bureaucratic demands, to personal issues like coping skills, empathy and whether or not the clinician is finding meaning in their work⁷.



5. [https://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196\(16\)30625-5/pdf](https://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196(16)30625-5/pdf)

6. Tait Shanafelt, MD et al., "The Business Case for Investing in Physician Well Being," JAMA Internal Medicine, September 25, 2017. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/article-abstract/2653912>

7. <https://www.aan.com/siteassets/home-page/tools-and-resources/academic-neurologist-researchers/program-and-fellowship-directors/factors-affecting-clinician-well-being-and-resilience.pdf>

Physicians Who Feel Cared About Are Highly Engaged

When physicians (and all staff) know and see that leadership cares about their well being, engagement increases and morale improves. The benefits of strong physician engagement are well documented. A 2017 Gallup Survey found engaged physicians:

- May give a hospital three percent more outpatient referrals and 51 percent more inpatient referrals.
- Have a reported 26 percent higher productivity level.
- Reduce referral leakage and experience increased loyalty.
- Have a more engaged patient base.
- Are often more loyal, more cooperative and are willing to work through challenges while providing constructive feedback.
- Are dedicated to their patients and committed to the improvement of their organizations⁸.

A 2020 study by physicians Jamiu Busari and Adedayo Onitilo found that providers who are engaged maintain good levels of career satisfaction and are likely to stay in their current position, even if they are experiencing a moderate level of burnout⁹.



A Culture of Care for the Whole Physician

We look at this situation armed with the knowledge that there are solutions that add up to some of the best business decisions you, as a leader, can make.

Overall, it means instilling a culture of care at every level of the organization, all the way up to the top levels of leadership. No matter how busy the occupants of the C-Suite may be, if these concepts and practices don't have an important place in your awareness, the culture of care concept may wither.

It's obvious that any business who doesn't care for its most valuable assets can lose them. And the most valuable assets in a healthcare organization are its physicians and care teams.

ENGAGED PHYSICIANS GIVE A HOSPITAL MORE REFERRALS

3
PERCENT
more outpatient

51
PERCENT
more inpatient

8. Quoted from "What Are the Benefits of Physician Engagement?" MedicalGPS, March 28, 2017. <https://blog.medicalgps.com/what-are-the-benefits-of-physician-engagement/>

9. Jamiu O. Busari et al., "Fact or Fable: The Truth About Physician Engagement and Burnout," Clinical Medicine & Research, March 18, 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7153798/>

There's skepticism, of course. Some administrators feel that, given limits of time and resources, nothing significant can be done beyond urging physicians to care for themselves. Other administrators are willing to embrace well being at the organizational level, but they can misidentify well being as limited to their physicians' physical wellness.

But as I've pointed out, well being has multiple dimensions: emotional, spiritual, physical, financial/legal, professional and relational. As a national behavioral health consulting practice, our team of experts developed a holistic approach to well being, called the [Wheel of Well Being](#).

This straightforward framework considers every dimension of one's well being as essential to overall well being. If one dimension, or several dimensions, are lagging behind or out of balance, there will be a negative impact.

Creating a culture of care that pays attention to all of these areas means taking certain concrete steps:

- Listening to physicians' concerns and responding in a timely and appropriate manner
- Training staff in how to recognize a distressed physician, make referrals and offer aid and support
- Providing well being resources that are readily available and easy to use





A Wealth of Resources That Support the Business Case

Each of the following resources have proven results and help to improve overall physician well being, which will pay off handsomely in the long run:

Peer Coaching

[Peer coaching](#) is a proven and effective tool to support physicians in achieving goals, decreasing burnout, addressing challenges and strengthening personal and professional well being. Physicians engage with a credentialed coach who is also a licensed medical professional so they understand and have personal experience with the unique challenges in healthcare. [Our peer coaching white paper](#)¹⁰ reported that 88 percent of physicians prefer colleagues as a source of support.¹¹ Additionally, peer coaching improved participating physicians' well being by 58 percent, with the most impact being felt in the areas of improved self-awareness, improved confidence and emotional validation.

Counseling

Counseling is a deeper dive that involves analyzing, addressing and resolving problems that impact physicians emotionally or are impairing their ability to perform at their highest level. Counseling starts with a well being assessment to determine behavioral and emotional challenges that are impacting the physician's performance or overall well being. Working with a highly-vetted master's or doctorate level Senior Consultant, the physician engages in a non-diagnostic therapeutic relationship. During their sessions together, they can explore questions like, 'who am I,' 'how do I feel' and 'how do I cope with this.' They help identify areas of concern and create a private and confidential space where the physician can navigate both personal and professional challenges.

10. Ferron, L, Shannon, D.W. "Peer Coaching: Impacts on Physician Well Being, New Data and Existing Evidence." A VITAL WorkLife White Paper <https://info.vitalworklife.com/peer-coaching-white-paper>

11. Hu YY, Fix ML, Hevelone ND, Lipsitz SR, Greenberg CC, Weissman JS, Shapiro J. [Physicians' needs in coping with emotional stressors: the case for peer support. Arch Surg. 2012;147\(3\):212-7.](#)

Help with life tasks

We've found making day-to-day life easier for physicians helps them maximize their time with family and friends and stay focused on patients and the administrative demands of practicing medicine while at work. That's why we offer a [WorkLife Concierge](#) service, where a virtual assistant helps with every day and special occasion tasks like child and elder care, home and auto services, errands and shopping and appointment scheduling.

Intervention, if needed

If a physician is acting in ways that disrupt workflows, care team dynamics or reduce his or her effectiveness, an intervention may be called for. We've had proven success with our four-stage [Physician Intervention Process](#): Initial organization consultation, physician assessment, year-long case management and closing summary report and consultation with the organization. Initiated by the organization, this solution can help you make management decisions, reduce litigation risks and avoid the potential costs of hiring and onboarding a replacement. This solution will help you retain your physician, when possible, by effectively addressing disruptive behaviors to help bring your physician back to being a fully productive member of your medical staff.

This solution is also a leadership tool that provides a clear path for both the organization and the referred physician to work together in addressing concerns that led to the intervention.



The Business Case: One Leader's View

Does the investment I'm encouraging you to make actually work? I'd like to introduce you to a healthcare leader to help answer this question. At the beginning of this article, I cited some troubling numbers about physician turnover. VITAL WorkLife has worked with Dr. Kevin Coss, Medical Director, Physician Wellbeing, at Community Health Network in Indianapolis, and his colleagues to set up our Physician Well Being Resources solution, in addition to numerous internal resources, and he recently shared his assessment with us.

"We felt that our program would be a key differentiator in recruiting and retaining high-quality physicians and advanced practice providers in a very competitive market.... I think that it has certainly been the case," he told us. "Our low turnover rate of four percent has been relatively stable since the well being program was started in 2017—and this period, of course, includes the pandemic. This compares very favorably with national turnover rates of six to eight percent. Our recruiters clearly highlight the fact that we have a Center for Physician Well-Being and Professional Development as a key component to support physicians and APPs in our network."



Tait Shanafelt, MD, Jeanie and Stew Ritchie Professor of Medicine, Chief Wellness Officer, Stanford Medicine, Associate Dean, Stanford School of Medicine, and colleagues, offer a concise summation of why strategic investment in physician well being is a sound business decision: "Evidence, suggests that improvement is possible, investment is justified, and return on investment measurable. Addressing this issue is not only the organization's ethical responsibility, it is also the fiscally responsible one."



DR. KEVIN COSS,
MEDICAL DIRECTOR,
PHYSICIAN WELLBEING,
AT COMMUNITY HEALTH
NETWORK IN INDIANAPOLIS

Dr. Coss graduated from the Medical College of Ohio and completed his internship and residency at Indiana University. He is a board certified physician who has been in practice since

1987 and is listed in the Guide to America's Top Physicians by the Consumer's Research Council of America.



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*Dr. Kevin Coss
Medical Director, Physician Wellbeing,
at Community Health Network in Indianapolis*

Dr. Coss agreed. "Our network board and executive leadership team felt a moral and ethical responsibility as a healthcare organization to support the well being of our physicians and advanced practice providers," he said.

"Our leadership recognized the significant impact and scope of [stress and] burnout on the ability of our organization to provide high quality, safe, cost effective healthcare and achieve outstanding patient satisfaction. In addition, we have expanded the VITAL WorkLife Physician Well Being Resources solution to all of our independent physicians and advanced practice providers on our medical staff. Again, we felt this was an important commitment to all those who provide care to patients within the network. This was extremely well received and reflected our ongoing commitment to their well being."

Ethically alert, medically excellent, fiscally sound—who in leadership doesn't want to create a win-win-win like that?



MITCH BEST, CEO

As CEO of VITAL WorkLife, Mitch is responsible for leading the vision of the company and managing the senior leadership team to meet company goals and objectives. He joined the company in 2001 as Director of Business Development, was promoted

in 2004 to Vice President of Business Development and Account Services, then to COO in 2008 before buying the company in 2013. Mitch's passion and commitment to leadership and organizational development matched with his ongoing breadth of behavioral health consulting experiences and various industry expertise provides strong business leadership and oversight for the organization. For the last ten years Mitch has actively participated in local, regional and national executive peer and industry groups. He previously served in account services and business development roles for companies in the technology and services sectors. Mitch holds a BA in psychology from the University of Minnesota.



Contact us to learn more about proven solutions to improve the well being of your healthcare team and your bottom line.



Contact us by phone at **877.731.3949**, online at [VITALWorkLife.com/contact-us](https://vitalworklife.com/contact-us) or schedule a **free consultation** with us.

ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a physician-focused national behavioral health consulting practice supporting all dimensions of well being in the workplace with a multitude of solutions. Serving the U.S. healthcare industry since 2007, our national team of certified physician peer coaches and senior behavioral health consultants deliver life-changing well being solutions.

Sources:

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2. <https://www.mgma.com/resources/human-resources/on-the-lookout-a-tight-physician-market-in-a-post>
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6. Tait Shanafelt, MD et al., "The Business Case for Investing in Physician Well Being," JAMA Internal Medicine, September 25, 2017. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/article-abstract/2653912>
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