

a VITAL WorkLife article

From Post-Traumatic Stress to Post-Traumatic Growth

By: Susan Wilson, MD, CPC



Coming up in the article:

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- Facing PTSD, Embracing PTG
- The Need for Help

The last three years have taken their toll on everyone, particularly medical practitioners who have been forced to confront a deadly pandemic with its myriad of consequences. Clinicians have been bombarded by a multitude of challenges, including fears prompted by a novel disease, inadequate PPE and the possibility of infecting loved ones at home. In addition, the moral injury born of rationing resources, struggles with understaffing and the politicization of a public health issue have made the climate in healthcare extremely stressful. As a result, we are seeing unprecedented levels of PTSD in the medical community.

Where We Are Now

All of these issues compound the problems that pre-dated COVID, including burnout driven by the many demands of modern healthcare, the stoicism inculcated by medical education and the disconnect between medical administration and clinical practice.

Although this seemingly paints a dismal picture, there are encouraging signs and hopeful trends within the medical field. Despite the increasing rates of physician burnout since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of applicants to medical school—a net increase of 5.4% from pre-pandemic to present day. Similarly, enrollment in entry-level nursing programs increased 3.3% in 2021, as did Doctor of Nursing Programs (up 4%).

In addition to these promising statistics, there are also indications that nurses are feeling better about their work. In a 2021 survey, 81 percent of nurses said they were satisfied with their jobs. While the pandemic increased rates of burnout and feelings of being emotionally drained among nurses—there is a ripe opportunity for employers to address the well-being of their healthcare workforce.

Furthermore, the crisis of the pandemic has prompted the use of telehealth, which has been embraced by physicians and patients alike as a uniquely flexible way of delivering and receiving care.



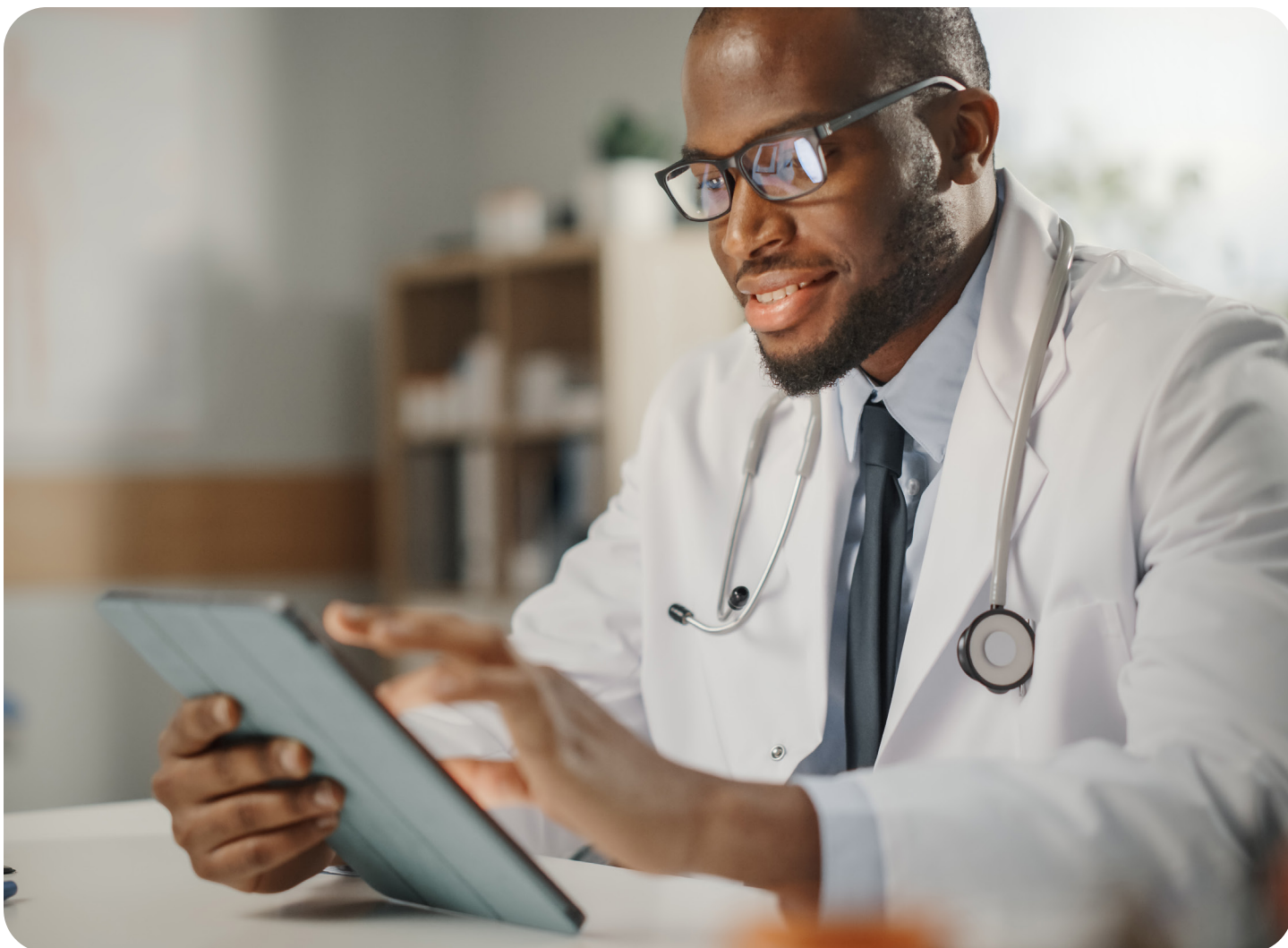
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Facing PTSD, Embracing PTG

Recognizing the impact of PTSD on the medical community and supporting clinicians through this time is crucial to the stabilization of healthcare as we know it. One of the most promising drivers of recovery is the concept of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG): the idea that individuals can learn and draw strength from the adversities that have traumatized them.

As understood by the growing field of positive psychology—a discipline that focuses on states of normalcy and happiness rather than mental and emotional dysfunction—“PTG is a psychological transformation that follows a stressful encounter. It is a way of finding purpose in pain, and looking beyond the struggle.”

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PTG was first identified and named in the mid-90s by Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun of the University of North Carolina. As Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury explains on the Positive Psychology website, “People who undergo post-traumatic growth flourish in life with a greater appreciation and more [resilience](#). They [Tedeschi and Calhoun] define PTG as a positive psychological change in the wake of struggling with highly challenging life circumstances.”

On the individual level, Chowdhury writes, PTG can be recognized by the following characteristics:

- The embrace of new opportunities—both at the personal and the professional fronts.
- Improved personal relationships and increased pleasure derived from being around people we love.
- A heightened sense of gratitude toward life altogether.
- Greater meaning & purpose.
- Increased emotional strength and resilience.

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— Roy Chowdhury

Traumatic events are painful, but they can also awaken, motivate and drive positive change. We’ve all had the experience of adversity bringing us closer to our loved ones, to our real needs and goals which lead to a greater sense of self.

The Need for Help

It is recognized that the major drivers of burnout in medicine are institutional (i.e. excessive workload, productivity measures, EMR and disillusionment with administration). However, there is much that individual physicians can do to promote their satisfaction and fulfillment. In addition to the industry making it professionally safe to seek help, the resources for such efforts need to be made available through the healthcare system and include initiatives that feature therapists, coaches and counselors. An effective well-being program provides easily accessible, confidential resources that empower physicians to take the necessary steps towards their own PTG.

As physicians navigate the great recovery, they need a multi-faceted approach to well-being. Healthcare systems must support and nurture their employees—**PTG affords the opportunity to thrive, not just survive.**



Contact us to learn more about how to foster a culture of well-being and launch a well-being program for your organization.



Contact us by phone at 877.731.3949, or online at [VITALWorkLife.com/contact-us](https://vitalworklife.com/contact-us)

ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife is the leading mental health and well-being expert for healthcare organizations and their workforce. We've focused on healthcare since 2007, and today our innovative solutions are leading the way in helping physicians, nurses and entire care teams address professional burnout, life challenges and barriers to seeking help.



Scan the QR Code to
schedule a free consultation.



SUSAN WILSON, MD, CPC

Dr. Susan Wilson has been a Peer Coach for VITAL WorkLife since 2020. She has been practicing Emergency Medicine since 1994, after attending Loyola-Stritch School of Medicine in Chicago, and completing her residency at

The Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. She retired from clinical practice in June 2019. Wanting to maintain involvement in Medicine, Dr. Wilson became a certified physician peer coach, now providing guidance and support to healthcare professionals. Her 25 years as a hospital-based, board certified physician has afforded great insight into the challenges of medicine. Having seen the evolution of medical practice, and witnessing firsthand how these changes have impacted her colleagues, Dr. Wilson sees coaching as an important tool to address issues of job satisfaction, work/life balance, and burnout among physicians. Dr. Wilson is using "mental fitness" as the framework for her coaching, and helps her clients to shift mindset from negative to positive. She also has a special interest in Clinician Distress Syndrome (AKA Second Victim Syndrome), and offers peer support for those suffering acute, traumatic events. She can be reached at her website, [SJWprofessionalcoaching.com](https://sjwprofessionalcoaching.com).

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