

a VITAL WorkLife article

# How to Lead the Way Toward Physician Well Being

*Organizational leadership and culture impacts physician burnout*



*This is the second in a series of articles from VITAL WorkLife addressing physician well being solutions at multiple levels, from individual self-care to organizational support for physician well being.*

Over 50 percent of physicians exhibit some signs of burnout.<sup>1</sup> Along with the most significant changes in healthcare's history, including technological advances and sweeping changes to everything from governmental policies to organizational workflow, there is an urgent need for healthcare leadership to recognize and address this crisis.

According to the Maslach Burnout Inventory, signs of burnout include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism and feelings of unfulfillment or lack of accomplishment. When physicians suffer from burnout, the downstream effects are immense.<sup>2</sup> It can affect patient safety and satisfaction, risk management, as well as staff retention and recruiting.

**What role can physician leadership play in offering and supporting solutions?**

1. "Report reveals severity of burnout by specialty" AMA Wire. (2017). Retrieved from <https://wire.ama-assn.org/life-career/report-reveals-severity-burnout-specialty>

2. "The measurement of experienced burnout," Maslach, C. & Jackson, S. (1999). PDF retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.4030020205/pdf>



*“Leaders must take care of their own well being as a starting point to supporting reducing stress and building resiliency within their organizations. It’s no longer a nice to have; it’s a prerequisite.”*

—J. Bryan Sexton

## The Importance of Leadership on Physician Well Being and Patient Outcomes

The Mayo Clinic has for many years been a leader in healthcare organizational innovation. Much of this innovation springs from their physician-led culture. Mayo’s leadership program was built with a four-part framework:

1. Development curricula were targeted to specific roles and stages of leadership.
2. Curricula applied a core set of consistent design principles across programs.
3. Programs proved demonstrable ROI through the use of real-world projects with real-world impact.
4. Leaders were physicians first and foremost.<sup>3</sup>

The Mayo program has also resonated with other physician leaders in the field.

Craig Uthe, MD, has practiced family medicine at Sanford Health for 24 years in Sioux Falls, SD. Dr. Uthe is certified in addiction medicine, working alongside physicians and healthcare professionals at the South Dakota Health Professionals Assistant Program, where he has been a medical advisor for 18 years. He is currently the Medical Director of Physician Well Being and Leadership Development.

Dr. Uthe reports when administrators or physicians with good leadership skills are in a position of authority, it often leads to decreased burnout. According to Dr. Uthe, physicians who rated their supervisors as “... showing good leadership qualities, such as basic competency, respect, character and good communication skills...” were more engaged and demonstrated increased resiliency.

As J. Bryan Sexton of Duke University remarked at the September 2017 ASHHRA conference, “Leaders must take care of their own well being as a starting point to supporting reducing stress and building resiliency within their organizations. It’s no longer a nice to have; it’s a prerequisite.”<sup>4</sup>

These factors, of targeting curricula to specific roles, applying consistent design principles, using real-world projects with real-world impact and making physicians leaders first and foremost, all begin with a supportive organizational culture.

3. “The secret of Mayo Clinic’s physician-leader training program” AthenaInsight. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.athenahealth.com/insight/mayo-physician-leadership>

4. “Reduce Stress and Burnout, Part 1: Create a New Response to Stress” Retrieved from <https://www.advisory.com/-/media/Advisory-com/Research/HRIC/Events/Meeting/ASHHRA/2017/Reduce-Stress-Burnout-Part-1-ASHRAA.pdf>



## Factors Behind a Healthy Organizational Culture

At Sanford Health, an organizational culture was developed so healthcare leadership could support physician well being. It took dialogue, ongoing communication and interaction to build this culture.

Sanford Health established a leadership academy where participants with leadership potential have the opportunity to further develop their skills. The academy matches physicians with administrators who then go through a half-year program where they meet monthly and work on leadership and well being skills together. The program has helped physicians to identify their stress and utilize tools to minimize it.

Organizational acknowledgment of burnout was an important step toward building physician resiliency. Partnering with healthcare leadership, physicians were empowered to bring new interpersonal and resiliency skills into their own clinics or departments.

*“Resilience is the ability to persevere through the trials, tribulations, hurdles and obstacles of the medical practice.”*

—Craig Uthe, MD

## Physician Resiliency and Self-Care

“Ask a physician if he or she is burned out,” states Dr. Uthe, “and, like a person with chronic pain, you’re likely to get ten different answers. That’s why it’s difficult to define burnout.” Resilience, Dr. Uthe adds, is the ability to persevere through the trials, tribulations, hurdles and obstacles of the medical practice.

Those trials and obstacles have only increased with more paperwork and restrictions put on practice patterns, adding to external pressures from insurance companies, government agencies and policies restricting physicians in their practices.

“Furthermore,” says Dr. Uthe, “there’s a correlation between physician burnout and electronic medical records. EMRs require more attention from the physician than ever before.” Nearly 80% of physician burnout is driven by system factors, while about 20% is related to individual factors.<sup>5</sup> It’s a frustrating challenge many physicians have identified, resulting in increased demand for tools and resources to assist with physician resiliency and self-care.

5. “To address burnout’s underlying causes, look to team-based care” AMA-Wire. (Nov. 2017). Retrieved from <https://wire.ama-assn.org/life-career/address-burnout-s-underlying-causes-look-team-based-care>



Interested in learning more about how VITAL WorkLife can help build strong leaders in your healthcare delivery organization?

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**VITALWORKLIFE.COM**



#### ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a national behavioral health consulting company supporting all dimensions of well being. Our healthcare solutions are designed specifically to meet the unique needs of physicians and providers. Our team of licensed master's and doctorate level senior consultants, physician peer coaches, psychiatrists and other specialists have deep experience in issues surrounding physician performance, satisfaction and retention. Our ultimate goal is to proactively help physicians and organizations address issues before they escalate to the point of affecting performance and patient safety.

#### Sources:

1. "Report reveals severity of burnout by specialty" AMA Wire. (2017). Retrieved from <https://wire.ama-assn.org/life-career/report-reveals-severity-burnout-specialty>

2. "The measurement of experienced burnout," Maslach, C. & Jackson, S. (1999). PDF retrived from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.4030020205/pdf>

3. "The secret of Mayo Clinic's physician-leader training program" AthenaInsight. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.athenahealth.com/insight/mayo-physician-leadership>

4. "Reduce Stress and Burnout, Part 1: Create a New Response to Stress" Retrieved from <https://www.advisory.com/-/media/Advisory-com/Research/HRIC/Events/Meeting/ASHHRA/2017/Reduce-Stress-Burnout-Part-1-ASHRAA.pdf>

5. "To address burnout's underlying causes, look to team-based care" AMA-Wire. (Nov. 2017). Retrieved from <https://wire.ama-assn.org/life-career/address-burnout-s-underlying-causes-look-team-based-care>

6. "Preventing physician burnout." AMA, Steps Forward. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.stepsforward.org/modules/physician-burnout>

7. "2017 Physician & Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey Report," VITAL WorkLife. (2017). Page 15 <http://info.vitalworklife.com/2017-survey-report>

## Strategies For Improvement

The first step is acknowledging the need for promoting physician well being within the organization. Following on its heels is an organizational well being assessment—such as an annual screening tool available to physicians. The AMA recommends recurring annual assessments to re-evaluate wellness, refine interventions and make improvements.<sup>6</sup>

Making sure resources are in place goes hand-in-hand with the assessment step, including support via a physician portal with links to multiple resources on well being, resiliency, burnout, improving communication and character-type behavior skills are important to the medical practice. Dr. Uthe reports Sanford Health "offers any physician an evaluation for burnout." Secondly, Sanford has empowered physician leadership and department chairs with resources for individual physician-to-department burnout assessments. Within the Sanford Health system, newly hired and early career physicians are provided with half-day well being workshops, available to all new physicians, Advanced Practice Providers and Nurse Practitioners.

Beyond assessments, healthcare leadership must work with physicians in recognizing the early signs of stress and burnout, talking with healthcare providers who need support and reducing barriers while building a culture of well being and care. The primary barrier remains lack of time for physicians to utilize available well being solutions and if the barriers pertaining to time and communication are not addressed, the success rate of any wellness program is affected. As stated in a 2017 Physician & Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey, "These barriers must be overcome for well being solutions to help physicians and advanced practitioners manage their stress levels. Some barriers, such as awareness of what is available and awareness of what works, may be addressed through better internal communication. Other barriers must be fixed through organizational culture changes, such as unresponsive leadership."<sup>7</sup> Team-based care is the watchword and involves interpersonal communication skills, empathy and patient care—all valuable components toward empowering physicians to be motivated to take care of themselves.

To access additional tools designed to help organizational leaders support physician well being go to [vitalworklife.com](http://vitalworklife.com).