



Reducing Clinician Burnout

with Yoga and Mindfulness Training

White Paper



WORK WELL **NW**

Introduction

More and more clinicians are experiencing symptoms of burnout. 45% of all physicians report feeling burnt out. The statistic increases to over 50% for general internal medicine, neurology, and family medicine, and rises to 60% for emergency medicine.¹⁴ Over 40% of hospital nurses rank high when testing for job-related burnout, while more than 1 in 5 intend to leave their hospital positions within a year.¹³

Burnout is assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) with three subscales including “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment” states an article in the American Journal of Infection Control.¹ They go on to state that “Emotional exhaustion has been identified as the key component of burnout syndrome.”

This depleted state of mind can lead to medical errors, high turnover of staff, early retirement, and low patient satisfaction. It is also associated with longer patient recovery time post discharge.⁴ A pilot study suggests physician stress is directly linked to increased medical malpractice claims.¹⁰ Another study through the University of Pennsylvania showed that nurse burnout is linked to increased rates of catheter-associated urinary-tract infections and surgical site infections.⁸

Root causes of burnout include excessive workload, loss of autonomy, administrative burdens and consequent inefficiencies, ever-present litigation threats, nurse to patient ratios, decline in personal relationships with patients and colleagues, and difficulties integrating personal and professional life.

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Burnout directly affects:

- Quality of care
- Safety of patients
- Treatment outcomes
- Patient satisfaction
- Nurse turnover
- Hospital staff morale
- Financial performance

Source: Paolini, H. Antidotes to Burnout: Fostering Physician Resiliency, Well-Being, and Holistic Development. 19 April 2013. Retrieved from Medscape.com.

How to Solve Clinician Burnout

When addressing burnout, areas of importance may include reviewing procedures and workflows, shift lengths, management styles, patient loads, and social support and empowerment. A growing body of evidence indicates that reducing stress through mindfulness is a promising intervention.

“[Burnout] can’t be solved with antidepressants or increasing somebody’s salary” says William Norcross, executive director of a physician wellness program at U.C.S.D. Norcross.⁷ He believes that mindfulness meditation and self-awareness exercises are the key to developing and maintaining resilience. Clinicians that have conquered or avoided burnout using mindfulness techniques build resilience to help them deal with the demands of their work. They are healthier, happier, and make fewer errors.

Stress-reduction programs definitely show promise. In a pilot study noted in the article *Enhanced Meaning in Work* by the American Medical Association, a program that individually trained staff in stress management resulted in a reduction in medical errors.¹⁰ They expanded the study to twenty-two hospitals, after which they witnessed a reduction by 70% in medical malpractice claims compared with only 3% at control hospitals.

Similarly positive findings for stress reduction techniques were discovered in a randomized trial looking at medical and premedical students in an eight-week mindfulness-based intervention. Those in the intervention reported reduced depression and anxiety and increased empathy.⁴

“Hospitals in which [nurse] burnout was reduced by 30% had a total of 6,239 fewer infections, for an annual cost saving of up to \$68 million.”¹

Association Between Mindful Communication and Burnout, Empathy, and Attitudes

Krasner and colleagues showed that participants (in an educational program in mindful communication) had large increases in mindfulness skills that were immediately detectable and sustained for up to fifteen months.

Physicians had large, durable improvements in burnout and mood disturbance. These changes correlated with improvements in empathy and mindfulness, suggesting that enhancing physicians' attention to their own experience not only increases their orientation toward patients but also reduces physician distress.

Source: Krasner MS, Epstein RM, Beckman H, et al. (2009). Association of an educational program in mindful communication with burnout, empathy, and attitudes among primary care physicians. *JAMA*, 302(12), 1284-1293.

Creating Clinician Resilience: Self-Awareness, Stress-Reduction, and Mindfulness Classes

Workplace wellness classes to prevent and heal burnout include self-awareness, stress-reduction, or mindfulness classes with breathing techniques, meditations, journaling, and mindful movement practices such as yoga.

When choosing a class facilitator, it is important to select a qualified professional with experience in teaching. They should be knowledgeable in:

- Breath work for reducing stress
- Mindfulness techniques
- Meditation practices
- An appreciation for the unique demands that clinicians face

Yoga classes combine several of these practices. Yoga reduces stress by shifting the body away from fight-or-flight into a more relaxed, parasympathetic response. In doing so, it “lowers breathing and heart rate, decreases blood pressure, lowers cortisol levels, and increases blood flow to the intestines and vital organs.”¹⁵

Self-Awareness Techniques

Some examples of self-awareness practices in the workplace (as excerpted from the *JAMA* article “Self-care of Physicians Caring for Patients at the End of Life”⁴) are:

- *Implement a role-shedding routine at the end of the workday such as hanging up your coat.*
- *Journal after a traumatic event.*
- *Use mindfulness meditations to reduce daily stress.*
- *Call a “time out” (usually just a few minutes) as a way of dealing with emotional flooding after a traumatic event; call a colleague saying, “I need a walk” or a break.*
- *Stop at a window in your workplace and notice something in nature; consciously give it your full attention for a few moments.*
- *Before going into the next patient’s room, pause and bring your attention to the sensation of your breathing for 2 to 5 breaths.*

Source: Kearny MK. Self-care of Physicians Caring for Patients at the End of Life. *JAMA* 2009; 301(11):1155-1164.

Approximately 86% of hospitals have implemented workplace wellness programs, according to the American Hospital Association.⁸

Summary:

Improving Clinician Resilience

Aside from organizational and procedural changes to reduce burnout, multiple studies suggest stress reduction training incorporating yoga and meditation^(5,6) as well as self-awareness practices that include mindfulness training to help clinicians identify what they value and connect with to find what is most meaningful in their work.²

Having easy access to a weekly class in mindfulness training could be the tipping point in the direction of improving the quality of each clinician's life and returning joy to their profession. Organizational benefits of reduced medical errors, better patient outcomes, and higher patient satisfaction are sure to follow.

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Work Well NW is a wellness program provider through Three Trees Yoga specializing in awareness-building practices that include yoga and meditation. Three Trees Yoga has demonstrated excellence in safe yoga practices since 2005. Their well-regarded yoga teacher training school ensures the highest quality instructors.



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