



Reducing Work Burnout by Eliminating Mental Health Stigma

Efforts across society have been successful in destigmatizing mental health and fostering open conversations. In healthcare, however, studies have shown that medical professionals of all generations indicate that mental health issues remain stigmatized.

Stigma has been found to be a leading factor in clinician reluctance to seek and utilize psychological and psychiatric assistance, increasing the risk of distress, fatigue, and even suicidal ideation. Fortunately, there are proven methods for earning trust and fostering an open, supportive work environment.

Stigma Among Medical Students

According to a 2023 study published by The Journal of Medicine Access regarding medical students seeking mental health assistance, **"concerns about stigma from peers and professional retaliation were notable for being barriers to treatment."**¹

25% ↔ 31%

Between 25% and 31% of medical students said they would not seek care because of concern about embarrassment, being seen as weak by others, and harm to reputation

94% ↔ 99%

94% to 99% of participants also stated that they would not view their fellow students negatively if they knew that their peers were seeking mental health care

47% ↔ 60%

47% to 60% of participants who screened positive for depression, anxiety, or hazardous drinking reported an unmet need for mental health services

These attitudes persist as individuals transition from scholastic to professional life, as evidenced by a 2021 study published by Occupational Medicine about doctors, mental health stigma, and barriers to seeking help:

Mental Health Stigma Among Professionals²

31

51

31% of older doctors & 51% of younger doctors believe a doctor experiencing anxiety/depression is a sign of personal weakness

48

63

48% of older doctors & 63% of younger doctors believe being a patient is a source of embarrassment

49

49% of doctors believe a clinician's chances for advancement and social standing and professional estimation by peers would fall if it were known that they had anxiety/depression

This perceived stigma can have deadly consequences. A 2023 study on factors associated with suicide in physicians published by Frontiers in Psychiatry found that, "Specifically, due to social and work stigma, physicians tend not to seek psychological or psychiatric assistance in case of presenting suicidal ideation or a mental disorder, increasing the risk of suicide..." (Hernández, 2023).

Clearly, students and clinicians at any stage of their career require credible assurances that receiving mental health care will not interfere with their job prospects and status within a program or organization.³

1. Wang, J., Fitzke, R. E., Tran, D. D., Grell, J., & Pedersen, E. R. (2023). Mental health treatment-seeking behaviors in medical students: A mixed-methods approach. The journal of medicine access, 7, 27550834221147787. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27550834221147787>

2. Wijeratne, C., Johnco, C., Draper, B., & Earl, J. (2021). Doctors' reporting of mental health stigma and barriers to help-seeking. Occupational medicine (Oxford, England), 71(8), 366-374. <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqab119>



What can be done?

Peer-to-Peer Support

The most important step is starting the conversation. Efforts should be made to foster this at a peer-to-peer level, as much of the studied fear of stigma comes from the perceptions of other doctors - perceptions that may not be true.

In the previously cited study from Occupational Medicine 55 to 66% of participants thought doctors with anxiety/depression were as reliable as an average doctor. That same study indicated that, when they do seek help for mental health issues, younger doctors sought out friends and family, while the older group found a work colleague to talk to.

Organizational Intervention

Start at the sentence level. A 2021 study on physician stigma and its relation to well-being recommends that governing bodies, medical boards, credentialing committees, and other relevant bodies adopt a Federation of State Medical Boards-approved question when asking about mental health:

"Are you currently suffering from any condition for which you are not being appropriately treated that impairs your judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect your ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical and professional manner?"⁴

Because the question is framed to address current impairment, encourages treatment, and leaves inquiries of mental health history out, it has a greater likelihood of garnering an open answer that could lead to life-saving care.

Ensuring Anonymity

Thoughtful surveying methods should also employ anonymity. Organizations serious about fostering well-being and reducing burnout among physicians employ validated tools to assess and monitor the signs of burnout among their medical professionals. Validated assessment tools, like the Mayo Clinic-developed Well-Being Index, prioritize anonymity, and make its reliably confidential data-keeping an easy-to-explain system to engender greater trust among participants.

These steps all align with the general recommendations provided by a 2020 study published in Journal of General Internal Medicine, which states that, "Normalizing appropriate accommodations for physicians with mental health conditions, creating opportunities for enhanced visibility and representation of physicians with mental health conditions, and learning from the patient experiences of physicians with mental health conditions are concrete steps we can take to help reduce mental health-related stigma for the good of patients, physicians, and other health professionals."⁵

3. Rátiva Hernández, N. K., Carrero-Barragán, T. Y., Ardila, A. F., Rodríguez-Salazar, J. D., Lozada-Martínez, I. D., Velez-Jaramillo, E., Ortega Delgado, D. A., Fiorillo Moreno, O., & Navarro Quiroz, E. (2023). Factors associated with suicide in physicians: a silent stigma and public health problem that has not been studied in depth. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 14, 1222972. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1222972>

4. Brower K. J. (2021). Professional Stigma of Mental Health Issues: Physicians Are Both the Cause and Solution. *Academic medicine : journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, 96(5), 635–640. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000003998>

5. Cho, H. L., & Huang, C. J. (2020). Why Mental Health-Related Stigma Matters for Physician Wellbeing, Burnout, and Patient Care. *Journal of general internal medicine*, 35(5), 1579–1581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05173-6>