

Provider Resilience: Staying Healthy to Support Healthy Families



Working with children and families can be professionally meaningful and satisfying. Caring for families who have experienced trauma, mental health challenges, or other social needs may also, at times, feel draining, upsetting, or frustrating to the health care provider.

Burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary stress are concerns for all medical practitioners. This may be especially true during a period of excessive workload or heightened personal stress. When you are overstretched, it can reduce the pleasure you find in work and life activities. It can also impact professional efficacy, add tension to your team, or raise conflict with patients' families. Chronic stress, if not managed in a healthy manner, can take a toll on both you and your patients. Over time, if left unchecked, the biological byproducts of stress can accumulate in your body and brain, affecting your health and well-being. This can leave you feeling depleted and less able to care for your patients in the manner you'd like. Patients rely on your empathic, compassionate, and professional engagement. In order to address their needs, you must focus on your own first. You can't help people fill their "emotional gas tanks" if yours is empty.



Try the “ABCs” of self-care

A

Awareness:

Check in on your body and emotional state. This step requires you to focus on stress levels in a concrete way. Take 30 seconds (and maybe some deep breaths) before entering the next exam room to ask yourself: How am I feeling right now? Do I sense stress anywhere in my body, neck, shoulders, jaw, stomach, etc.? Take a deep breath and release it. Repeat if necessary.

B

Balance:

Consider how you divide your time between your personal and work life. You will be most productive when you make time to rest, relax, and recharge. Being mindful of work–life balance and implementing reasonable boundaries will help keep your battery charged, while at the same time giving you time and space to grow as both a person and provider. Maintaining balance will also help you manage your own stress—a big positive for you and your patients.

C

Connection:

Build supportive relationships with people in all areas of your life, including your work and home community. Make spending time with friends and family a priority. Identify the activities that make you feel the happiest and most fulfilled, and schedule these into your calendar to ensure they don't get “lost” in the shuffle of everyday life. The stronger your connections and social supports, the better you will feel.

Practicing self-care

Taking care of others is a vital part of your job. However, if you don't notice your own limitations or recognize when exhaustion strikes, it's simply not possible to care for your patients effectively. Think about the domains of intervention you talk to patients about that affect the regulation of the stress response: sleep, exercise, nutrition, mindfulness, mental health, and healthy relationships. Try to practice self-care strategies that address each of these six domains

Placing “holds” into your calendar at regular times may help ensure that self-care actually happens. To increase awareness, you can use technology (e.g., apps, timer) to remind you throughout the day to engage in self-care activities related to the six domains such as drinking more water, taking a walk outside, or logging onto a mindfulness app for 5 minutes.



Red-flag stress responses

Anyone can be vulnerable to absorbing the intense emotions and experiences of the people around them. For individuals working with at-risk populations, combined with long hours and heavy workloads, the brain and body can very quickly get run down. It is your responsibility to take care of yourself, so that you can continue to do your job effectively and empathically. If you notice some of the red flags below occurring regularly, it might be time to re-focus on self-care.



Physical reactions:

- Sleep disturbances
- Changes in appetite
- Headaches or stomach aches



Emotional reactions:

- Sense of vulnerability
- Increased mood swings
- Irritability



Behavioral reactions:

- Sense of isolation, withdrawal from social interactions
- Changes in alcohol or drug consumption
- Changes in relationships with others, personally and professionally

“Team-care” strategies

You may want to consider care strategies within your professional setting to manage work-related stress. Because patients today require teams of professionals to deliver comprehensive care, the well-being of the care team is vitally important. Feeling an integral part of a cohesive, healthy team is, by itself, an important protective factor against stress. Some strategies include:

- using active listening and offering empathy when colleagues discuss personal stress or challenging work situations
- accessing organizational support for employee well-being, such as employee assistance programs (EAP) or mental health coverage
- scheduling regular reflective supervision with individual check-ins for each team member
- establishing regular team meetings, debriefs, and planned connection time outside of the office
- balancing workloads when possible so team members have a fairly equal balance of families with intense, moderate, and low intensity of provider-related needs

SOURCES

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