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# How to Effectively Manage Stress and Avoid Physician Burnout

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Life as a hospitalist in 2022 America isn't for the faint of heart. It's a job that unfolds in an uncertain fashion from day to day, set in a high-stakes, high-stress environment where many patients don't particularly want to be cared for or attended to. All too often, the end result is a medical professional left to manage (or try to manage) all-too-common conditions like anxiety, depression, exhaustion, and the dreaded physician's burnout.

"Being a hospitalist is hard," states Dr. Jason C. Bartsch, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine and Hospitalist, University of Vermont Medical Center, Burlington, VT. "We have a tough job, we take care of a lot of people, and we're under time constraints. They're very sick, they're scared, and they're not always happy to have us be a part of their care."

In his lecture entitled "Physician Resilience in Hospital Medicine," Dr. Bartsch takes an up-close look at how to overcome burnout, manage stress, practice resilience, achieve "focus mode" and more. His brief yet in-depth 30-minute lecture was recorded at Hospital Medicine 2020, presented by The Robert Larner, M.D. College of Medicine at The University of Vermont.

"The traditional definition of burnout is that it's a constellation of symptoms of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, or depersonalization — and a feeling of personal ineffectiveness," explains Dr. Bartsch, who details his own personal

struggles with burnout during his second year as a full-fledged hospitalist. "I've come to believe that burnout is a symptom of something larger."

While this expert-level lecture is ideal for physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, and support staff working in the hospital medicine, internal medicine, and emergency medicine fields, it contains a wealth of invaluable information and insights that can benefit all medical professionals. A close listen will clearly articulate:

- A clear definition of what burnout is — and how to overcome it
- What resilience is — and why it's vitally important to practicing physicians in hospital medicine
- How the brain functions and focuses — and what the main stressors are for physicians
- How to best manage and mitigate stress using resilience tools

After listening to and absorbing this program, you'll be empowered to elaborate on the role of resilience in the management of burnout. You'll also be equipped to practice strategies that improve stress management and hone a resilient mindset. This CME-accredited course also qualifies for AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™ for 35 months from the date of its original publication (Nov. 12, 2020).



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## Physician resilience: A closer look

In the opinion of Dr. Bartsch, there’s a good amount that gets misunderstood or misconstrued when it comes to the topic of resilience.

“Resilience, just like burnout, can really get a bad reputation at times,” says Dr. Bartsch. “It prevents the small issues from causing big problems and it allows us to recover more quickly from the larger problems. All of that helps us spend much less effort on our perceived problems.”

But just what is resilience? Dr. Bartsch describes it as “the ability to withstand or resist adversity, bounce back or recover from adversity, and grow or rise despite life’s downturns.” As he notes, building this ability and skill set requires serious self-awareness and work.

“We use core principles to develop a resilient mindset,” explains Dr. Bartsch. “I hope to convince all of you that having a resilient mindset can really decrease moral injury — and more than that, allow us to be change agents because we’re all on the front lines of healthcare.”

Once built and maintained, resilience offers a wealth of benefits for today’s time-crunched clinician and medical professional. It prevents small issues from causing big problems, allows quicker recovery from larger problems, and helps form new, deeper, and more meaningful connections with patients and colleagues.

Dr. Bartsch also taps into the science of neuroplasticity, meaning the brain’s ability to form and reorganize neural networks — which are strengthened according to duration and intensity of use. Spending more time in the focus mode than in the default mode is key here, with particular value placed on focusing intently on matters within one’s control.

## Moral injury: What is it?

Before looking closer at the focus mode, however, Dr. Bartsch touches on the crucial concept and unfortunate phenomenon of “moral injury.” Defined as “the inability to provide high-quality care in the context of the healthcare system,” moral injury among physicians, clinicians, and medical professionals typically results in dysfunctional, or “maladaptive” responses and coping mechanisms. These behaviors can include arguing or engaging in “turf battles” with colleagues, feeling underappreciated, or even more “out-of-control” outbursts.

“We’re all trained to do the right thing for our patients,” explains Dr. Bartsch. “Burnout is really a symptom of moral injury. The biggest driver of moral injury is the systemic issue of our broken healthcare system. We’re all trained to do the right thing for our patients. We’ve gone to all of our healthcare being very much driven by corporations. A lot of things about the system make it hard for us. We express a lot of that moral injury stress in maladaptive ways.”

As Dr. Bartsch makes clear in his lecture, resilient people are better equipped to effectively navigate this complex and frustrating healthcare landscape — because they’re more capable of managing both burnout and moral injury. Resilient and mentally strong clinicians can also communicate and connect better with patients — and make better recommendations regarding the healthcare system.

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## Burnout — and how to overcome it

Dr. Bartsch is firm in his belief that burnout is ultimately “a symptom of moral injury.” The at-times debilitating condition is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, depersonalization, and a feeling of personal ineffectiveness. According to Dr. Bartsch, more than half of all physicians today report at least one of these symptoms within their workplace and career.

But just how does one go about avoiding, reducing, or even overcoming burnout today? Dr. Bartsch says it’s a complex question made even more challenging by the oft-overlooked nature of the condition — along with an increasingly adversarial relationship between healthcare workers and their employers.

“We, as hospitalists, have a huge lack of control,” states Bartsch. “Patients just kind of come in when they come in — and that’s just how it goes. But then we can have systemic things that can come down on us, too.”

Organizations, academic institutions, and healthcare systems often misidentify and wrongly classify clinicians’ frustration or concerns as burnout. Such a move also subtly implies that the “problem” lies with the clinicians — and their own lack of resourcefulness or resilience. Conversely, physicians and healthcare professionals may perceive an organization’s good-hearted efforts to prevent or reduce burnout as attempts to promote complacency.



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## Brain function and focus

Of course, there is always hope. There is always change. There is always hope that we can affect real change — both in our lives and in the lives of others. This is especially true for physicians, clinicians, and healthcare workers. It all starts in the mind.

An amazing fact that Dr. Bartsch illuminates in his lecture: the human brain encompasses more than 86 billion neurons. Such sheer magnitude doesn’t guarantee anything like consistent harmony, however. Attention levels alone can vary from intense focus to “running in the background.”

“The more common mode is the default mode, which is sort of the mind-wandering mode,” states Dr. Bartsch. “The brain is in default mode 50 percent to 80 percent of the time. The average person has close to 150 incomplete tasks every day.”

In stark contrast to the “default mode,” however, lies our “focus mode.” As Dr. Bartsch states, the focus mode is “very rewarding to our minds.” It’s also activated whenever we engage directly with challenging tasks, meaningful experiences, and novelty.

The opposite of focus? Another F word: fatigue. When we’re forced to spend more time on more tasks, especially the more mundane, menial ones, we are faced with increased levels of fatigue — which typically leads to decreased levels of focus and performance. As fatigue grows, engagement shrinks... and burnout can set in.

Of course, there’s also “stress mode” — a state of mind today’s hospitalists and medical professionals are all too familiar with. From corporate mandates to detailed documentation requirements to case overloads to moody or outright angry patients and more, the list of “stressors” can be rather long. Regardless of the particular stressor, the result is never good.



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“As soon as we have a stress, one of the first things that happens is there’s a lot of decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex,” explains Dr. Bartsch. “That’s our executive functioning place where we can multi-task and be logical. So, we lose our logical ability to do much right away. When the stress response is activated, our brain, despite how smart it is, does not distinguish between appropriate or inappropriate triggers... or physical and emotional triggers.”

## Managing stress using resilience

Perhaps the most useful portion of Dr. Bartsch’s lecture is his analysis of best practices when it comes to using resilience to manage stress and guard against burnout. Dr. Bartsch outlines a helpful, easy-to-remember three-step process for managing stress using resilience:

- Identify your primary stressors
- Eliminate these stressors if and when possible
- Choose where your attention is deployed

When properly executed, this three-step process can help reframe and accept stressors that simply cannot be eliminated. As Dr. Bartsch notes, the practices of “mindfulness” and “gratitude” also play co-starring roles here.

“To witness others’ suffering and provide comfort is the definition of compassion,” states Dr. Bartsch. “And when I think of the privilege that I have to be part of the medical profession, it gives me gratitude.”

## A wealth of Internal Medicine insights

To learn more about the benefits of a resilient mind for physicians, listen to Dr. Bartsch’s full lecture at your convenience. You can also connect to additional expertise and insights in hospital medicine and internal medicine anytime, anywhere by purchasing an AudioDigest Internal Medicine CME/CE Gold Membership or ordering our Best Lectures CME Collection for Internal Medicine.

Related lectures available from today’s preeminent thought leaders include “Cultivating Resilience Among Surgeons” by Mohsen Shabahang, MD, “Maintaining Resilience in Operating Room Staff” by Elizabeth R. Benjamin, MD, PhD, and “Reducing Burnout and Fostering a Culture of Wellness” by Katren Tyler, MBBS.