

The Patient Experience Post

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Your Staff is Burned Out: It's Time to Do Something About It!

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

There's no argument that members of helping professions—like healthcare—are particularly prone to burnout. We read and hear a lot about burnout among physicians and nurses; the problem is real. But, what's equally real is that burnout doesn't only affect these most prominent caregivers—it also affects our aides, our technicians, and our support staff. The pace of change is great these days, and the healthcare industry is bearing the brunt of it, whether related to regulation, technology, competition, or growing patient demands. All of that change, and an often-perceived helplessness or inability to deal effectively with it, can—and does—take a toll.

Patient-centeredness is a goal most organizations aspire to. That singular focus on the patient and the patient experience is critical to ensure positive outcomes, positive word-of-mouth and the continued success of our organizations. But patient-centeredness isn't possible if staff are suffering from burnout. It's hard to keep the patient at the center of our focus when we're feeling depleted and emotionally or physically exhausted.

The Big Question: Are You Paying Attention?

Healthcare leaders are in an important position to prevent and minimize burnout not only for the wellbeing of their staff, but to ensure a positive patient experience. When people aren't fully engaged they're not able to provide positive patient experiences. They can't be fully engaged when they're burned out.

In fact, when people are burned out they're more prone to error, which heightens concerns related to patient safety. They're also more likely to be absent, to leave the organization and even to suffer from drug and alcohol abuse or other forms of mental illness.

Fortunately, burnout leaves signs. Unfortunately, too often we fail to take the time to be alert to those signs. What should you be looking for?

Recognizing the Symptoms

There is a wide range of signs that you should be alert to:

- Increase in number of errors
- Apathy—lack of interest
- Decreased empathy for patients and coworkers
- Emotional exhaustion
- Short temper—appearing overwhelmed
- Physical symptoms can also be a sign: increased incidents of illness, headaches, etc.

It's important not only for leaders to understand, and be alert to the signs of burnout, but for leaders to train managers, supervisors and all staff to be alert to the signs.

According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), "Fatigue, exhaustion, and detachment coalesce such that clinicians no longer feel effective at work because they have lost a sense of their ability to contribute meaningfully. In the past few years, the growing prevalence of burnout syndrome among health care personnel has gained attention as a potential threat to health care quality and patient safety." That's equally true of non-clinicians. We're all in this together. Our patients require all of us to be engaged, eager and willing to provide them with exceptional care. But we can't do that when we're burned out.

Leaders have an important role to play.

A Role for Leaders

Leaders have a two-pronged impact on burnout. First of all, they lay the foundation for an environment and culture that minimizes burnout and model through their own behaviors and response to stressors a healthy way to handle workplace pressure. Secondly, leaders can help staff members and clinicians recognize and understand the signs of burnout—and encourage them to be alert to those signs. In addition, they can—and should—have regular one-on-one coaching discussions to help individuals connect, or reconnect, to purpose, discuss burnout and coping strategies.

Connection to purpose

Reflecting on why we went into healthcare in the first place and recalling the many moments when we feel that sense of connection can help us focus on the positives, rather than the negatives, of our calling. Ask staff: “At the end of the day as you reflect back, what made you feel most fulfilled?” It can be something as simple as a patient or coworker’s “Thank you for all of your help.”

Leaders have a role to play in encouraging clinicians and staff to accept the compliments they receive. Too often there is a tendency to say, “oh, that’s just part of the job.” Instead, coaching staff to own the compliment by saying something like, “Thank you, that means a lot to me,” can actually serve to strengthen our feelings of connection and purpose.

Leaders can also help staff by encouraging them to leave their work—not literally, but emotionally—at work when they leave at the end of their shifts. Pursuing a healthy work/life balance, while often challenging, is important and leaders can help ensure that this is not only possible, but required! It’s important for all of us to be able to detach at the end of the day and leave our jobs behind.

Let’s Celebrate!

Taking the time to celebrate and recognize the efforts of individuals and teams can also help strengthen feelings of purpose and pride. Those efforts can be work-related or personal. Maybe a staff member recently ran in a marathon, completed a quilt, or participated in some other personal activity they’re proud of. Think about hanging up a bulletin board where staff can show and share photos of the things they like to do when they’re not at work. It’s a great way to encourage conversation and build relationships—and it can go a long way toward recognizing the whole person, not just the professional who shows up to work every day.

Those are just a few ways that leaders—and others—can help minimize the negative impacts of burnout among dedicated healthcare providers and staff. I know there are others and [I’d love to hear from you](#). What do you do to address your own feelings of burnout? What do you do to identify burnout in those around you—[and help them to alleviate it?](#)



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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.

