

# Strategies for Mitigating Burnout Among the Health Center Workforce

## Introduction

Burnout is a serious and widespread problem among healthcare workers. A 2020 Mental Health American (MHA) survey found that 93% of healthcare workers experienced stress, 86% experienced anxiety, 76% reported exhaustion and burnout, 75% felt overwhelmed, 52% experienced compassion fatigue, and 82% reported feeling emotionally exhausted.

Burnout is not a personal failure or a sign of weakness. It is a workplace and system phenomenon that results from chronic stress, excessive workload, lack of autonomy, insufficient recognition, and inadequate support. **It affects not only the well-being and performance of individual workers but also the morale, culture, and outcomes of the entire organization.** Therefore, health center leadership must take a proactive role and work with staff to address the root causes of burnout and implement effective strategies to prevent and reduce it.

## Recognizing Burnout

**Burnout can manifest in various physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms, such as:**

- Fatigue, insomnia, headaches, and other somatic complaints
- Anxiety, depression, irritability, and low self-esteem
- Loss of interest, motivation, and enthusiasm for work
- Decreased productivity, quality, and creativity of work
- Increased absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, and intention to quit
- Impaired interpersonal relationships and communication
- Reduced empathy, compassion, and patient satisfaction

**Burnout can have severe consequences for individuals and organizations, such as:**

- Increased risk of physical illness, mental disorders, and substance abuse
- Reduced professional competence, ethical standards, and patient safety
- Decreased organizational commitment, loyalty, and trust
- Increased organizational costs, errors, and lawsuits
- Reduced organizational reputation, performance, and sustainability



Recognizing the signs and symptoms of burnout is a crucial first step. It is essential to acknowledge one's feelings and needs and seek help and support. Everyone needs to be aware of the factors that contribute to burnout and advocate for changes that can improve the work environment and the aspects of the healthcare system that result in some of the highest rates of burnout in any industry.

## Individual & Organizational Wellness

A thriving workforce requires dedication from everyone. Health center leadership must work to support individual and collective health by offering a range of human resources and relational resources. Each individual's effort is crucial in this collective endeavor.

Four key areas support organizational wellness and burnout prevention: emotional, financial, physical, and communication. Each area encompasses a range of strategies and resources that can help health center staff cope with stress, enhance their well-being, and foster a positive and supportive work environment.

**Leadership can support the **emotional** wellness of staff by:**

- Aligning the organization's work with the values and passions of their staff
- Providing peer support groups or mentoring programs
- Making employee assistance programs (EAPs) or other mental health services easily accessible
- Recognizing and celebrating achievements and contributions
- Prioritizing the use of paid time off
- Ensuring staff are able to disconnect from work

**Leadership can support the **financial** wellness of staff by:**

- Providing education on creating and following a budget and a savings plan
- Providing access to financial advice or counseling
- Ensuring staff know how to maximize their employee benefits such as retirement plans and health savings accounts
- Guaranteeing competitive compensation and benefits for ALL staff

**Leadership can support the **communication** wellness of staff by:**

- Listening actively and empathically to others
- Giving and receiving honest and constructive feedback
- Resolving conflicts constructively and diplomatically
- Recognizing others' efforts and achievements
- Seeking and offering help and support when needed
- Collaborating and cooperating with others to achieve common goals
- Prioritizing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) initiatives

**Leadership can support the **physical** wellness of staff by:**

- Offering nutritious food and drinks
- Developing opportunities for staff to get regular and moderate physical movement or exercise
- Providing low or no cost health insurance wellness benefits
- Participating in wellness programs or challenges

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## Creating an Organizational Wellness Plan

**1** The first step of an organizational wellness plan is to secure the commitment and support of the health center's leadership. Leadership also serves as role models for the rest of the staff and can demonstrate their support by:

- Recognizing and acknowledging the problem of burnout and its impact on the organization
- Expressing their genuine concern and care for the well-being and satisfaction of the staff
- Communicating their willingness to address the issue and make improvements
- Inviting and involving the staff in the process of assessment, planning, and implementation
- Providing the necessary resources, support, and guidance for the change initiatives
- Monitoring and evaluating the progress and outcomes of the change initiatives
- Reinforcing and rewarding the positive changes and behaviors

- 2 The second step is to gather feedback from the staff on their experiences and needs regarding their work environment and culture, as well as their suggestions and ideas for improvement. The feedback should cover various aspects of the work environment and culture, such as workload, autonomy, compensation, recognition, support, communication, values, and policies. Leadership should share the results with the staff.
- 3 The third step is to implement change based on the identified feedback and goals. Action plans address the specific issues and needs of the staff and the organization, as well as align with the mission, vision, and values of the organization.

**Action plans should include the following elements:**

- The objectives and outcomes of the change
- The strategies and activities to achieve the change
- The timeline and milestones of the change
- The roles and responsibilities of the change agents
- The resources and support needed for the change
- The indicators and measures of the change

**Once an action plan is complete, it should be:**

- Communicated and disseminated to the staff and the leadership (their feedback and input should be solicited and incorporated)
- Implemented with flexibility and adaptability
- Reviewed and revised periodically, and any achievements or successes should be celebrated and shared

## Resources

To learn more about the Association of Clinicians for the Underserved (ACU) well-being and wellness resources, please visit the following links:

- STAR<sup>2</sup> Center Mental Health & Well-Being Resource Bundle: <https://chcworkforce.org/bundle/burnout/>
- Bureau of Primary Health Care (BPHC) Workforce Well-being Technical Assistance (TA) Initiative: <https://clinicians.org/programs/primary-care-workforce/well-being-initiative/>

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