



Are You a Candidate for Podiatric Burnout?

Here's why it occurs and what to do about it.

BY JEANETTE SMITH

You pull up to the office and it takes all your motivation to leave the car. Inside, as you're checking your schedule for the day, you see a particularly difficult patient who often ignores your home care instructions. You are filled with frustration and dread and this puts you in a sour mood while seeing other patients.

When you finally see the trouble patient, you listen to his issue and determine it was a result of his negligent footcare. Instead of seeking out a new solution, you send him home with more instructions you know he will ignore. At the end of the day, you are mentally and physically exhausted. If you feel this way, you are facing burnout.

What Is Burnout?

Burnout is a serious issue that needs to be addressed for the safety of you, each patient you see, and the practice as a whole. Burnout in the medical profession is nothing new. In fact, psychologist Herbert Freudenberger coined the term "burnout"

after his observations of staff members working at the St Mark's Free Clinic in New York's East Village.

Colloquially, the term burnout had been used by patients to refer to those who experience the long-term effects of drug abuse. Freudenberger craft-

with patients. The Maslach Burnout Inventory is now used as the standard for assessing occupational burnout.

Burnout is a relatively new concept and modern socio-cultural phenomenon. It took until the 1970s to identify burnout because the condi-

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ed his own definition, citing what he deemed as emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, and waning commitment among medical professionals and volunteers. Freudenberger himself suffered from it multiple times, which informed his personal experiences and deepened his research.

Later, Christina Maslach would describe burnout as feelings of emotional fatigue and lack of personal accomplishment coupled with increasingly clinical and depersonalized interactions

tions that produce burnout simply didn't exist before the information revolution. As science and technology have advanced, humans have come under more stress, changing and intensifying burnout as we know it.

Is Burnout a Problem for Podiatrists?

Though there has been limited research into burnout specific to podiatrists, a study from 2004 looked

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at podiatrists in Australia and the United Kingdom and determined that levels of burnout in both groups were higher than published norms for other occupations.

Patrick DeHeer, DPM talks of a more recent study at his residency program in Indianapolis where podiatric residents were asked about their wellbeing and health. “What we found were similar to previously reported data [from other specialties]. The well-being was really low in general. The suicidal ideation was similar, around twenty percent of the respondents. We did that survey before COVID-19 started and published it after. Now things are even worse.”

Despite the lack of official research and data, the anecdotal evidence of burnout among podiatrists is clear. But why does it happen in the first place?



Dr. DeHeer

that we’re ingrained is that we put our own needs to the side. We’re ingrained to put patients first,” says Roody Samimi, DPM.

Caring so much for others often pushes physicians to consider their own needs second. As the ability to empathize with patients wanes, so too will the quality of care. And that’s when mistakes are made.

“In the [Do No Harm] documen-

apple cart the wrong way, you start making decisions that are short-sighted or may be wrong for the patient and, lo and behold, for yourself. This is where doctors get creative and do things they normally would not do. Doctors may begin doing procedures that aren’t necessary and then get themselves into trouble,” Dr. Borreggine warns. “Then you get a malpractice case because you did something inappropriate you

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tary, they talk about the pressure of being a physician and not being able to make a mistake. That pressure of being perfect all the time is overburdensome because we’re not. We all make mistakes,” Dr. DeHeer says.

On top of the fact that physicians are fallible like every human, negative treatment outcomes can produce feelings of loneliness. Instead of consulting with another podiatrist for help,

wouldn’t have done under the stress.” In fact, the Mayo Clinic reports that medical errors resulting from physician burnout cost the country 3.4 billion dollars every year.

Internalizing stress can lead to clinical depression, which is often accompanied by thoughts of suicide. After the suicides of several of his colleagues, Dr. DeHeer says, “It became a very important topic to me. Together we can utilize the full weight of our organization to provide resources for our colleagues around the country who are struggling with wellbeing and maybe even with suicidal ideations.”

From the Physicians’ Recovery Network which helps identify specific resources for getting help to the Physician Support Line, a free service available seven days a week, the APMA offers many resources on their website to assist with getting immediate or long-term care for burnout.

Burnout is a cycle of stress that impacts both the podiatrist and the patient. “I typically will try to minimize the impact [burnout] it has on the patient. It usually ends up creating stress on yourself,” says Dr. Samimi. A poor attitude due to burnout can lead to poor decisions which lead to stress which leads to a worsening attitude and so on. The only way to stop the cycle is to seek the right solution.

Reducing Burnout in Podiatrists

When it comes to tackling feelings of burnout, Dr. Borreggine takes

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Just as the causes of burnout vary, so too do the symptoms.

Causes of Burnout in Podiatry

“The fact is, what causes you to feel burnt out is that you’re trying to divide yourself among your business, your family, and other activities outside of your practice. One of those things is bound to overwhelm you, and I think the business of podiatry is often what does that,” says Joseph Borreggine, DPM.

There’s a reason the business side of things causes burnout. Residents focus on learning patient care and surgical techniques, not the ins and outs of running a private practice. “In the individual setting, it is a lot different than the corporate setting. The stress levels are a lot higher,” Dr. Borreggine agrees.

Another common cause of burnout in physicians is compassion fatigue. “I think that part of the way

podiatrists go it alone, increasing the pressure and leading to burnout.

Fallout of Burnout

Just as the causes of burnout vary, so too do the symptoms. “I think it’s about noticing personality changes,” Dr. DeHeer says. “If you’re married or have a significant other and [they] say you seem different... if you start hearing that from multiple people, you probably need to take a step back and make sure you are okay.” Personality changes such as becoming quick to anger or feeling perpetually fearful of the future can then manifest in the body as physical changes and sickness.

Besides being dangerous for the physician, burnout can lead to poor decision-making and negative outcomes for patients. “When something tips the

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a practical approach. “I’d first want to know what the root or the core of their burnout is. Once I find that answer, I’d give them suggestions for destressing and disconnecting from the situation. Those stresses may be

even more critical yet even more difficult to pursue care. “That’s the next step in this, to be able to seek the help we need once we realize it,” Dr. DeHeer says. “The awareness has been elevated over the last few years, which is much needed. But being able to get the help we need for

tems and the red tape that comes with Medicare and insurance requirements. Other technological advances such as telemedicine and remote patient monitoring can also intensify burnout.

“It’s really important to make sure that you leave your work at work, if you can,” says Dr. Samimi. “We have it set up so we can do messaging and

“Even before you enter practice, find a mentor, someone who is experienced.”

—Borreggine



Dr. Borreggine

check x-rays from home now, but as much as you can, leave your work at work.” For a burnt-out podiatrist who is pressured to work from home, work-life balance feels impossible to achieve. Creating a distinct boundary between work and home life allows a period of rest from caring for others, allowing us to check in and care for ourselves.

Of course, if you yourself are not suffering from burnout, that doesn’t mean those around you aren’t. “We’re all going through it together,” Dr. Samimi reminds us. Dr. DeHeer agrees,

business or family or financial. They need to plug into other places that allow them to destress.” This could include hobbies, spending time with friends, or even stepping away for a longer period and taking a vacation.

If you don’t feel you have the time for that, Dr. Samimi offers us something even simpler. “Something very quick you can do is just close your eyes and focus on your breath, even for fifteen seconds, especially if you’re feeling really overwhelmed. Meditation is useful. [Do it] even if you’re just turning your computer on.”

Meditation is proven to have physically calming effects on the body and can help relieve feelings of mental exhaustion.



Dr. Samimi

Along with psychological needs, podiatrists need to be taking care of their physical needs. Planning meal breaks during working hours, drinking plenty of water to stay hydrated, and getting enough sleep between shifts can make a world of difference when it comes to reducing burnout.

Dr. Samimi reminds us, “When you do have free time, take care of yourself and give yourself enough ‘me’ time. Prioritize the things you need. If you need additional help, there’s always counseling. Make sure you go out and take care of yourself.”

Unfortunately, many burnt-out podiatrists avoid counseling and may even turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. In those cases, it becomes

somebody at risk or struggling without it affecting their career negatively has to be the next step.”

For those who still choose not to seek out professional care or therapy, seeking out the counsel of another podiatrist can also be beneficial for relieving stress. “Even before you enter practice, find a mentor, someone who is experienced,” Dr. Borreggine suggests. “Do this before podiatry school. Create a partnership with

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someone you can be accountable to and then plug yourself into that individual to bring their knowledge and experience and wisdom to you.”

Dr. DeHeer agrees, saying it’s about “having a network of people you can depend on and talk to. Particularly surgeons, if we have a particular case that isn’t going well, we almost want to put our head in the sand because we feel we did something wrong and we’re embarrassed to talk about it. But we need to have people we can go to and say, ‘I have this patient with this terrible outcome, can you help me figure this out?’ without judgment and without ridicule.”

Along with a network of counsel should come the assistance of technology. Yet, technology often adds to stress rather than relieves it. Specifically, this frustration stems from EMR sys-

saying, “We’re all our brother’s keeper. Podiatry is a small field, and everyone knows everyone. Just make sure you’re touching base with people.”

Whether you identify it in yourself or in a friend or colleague, burnout is a serious condition that will not go away by itself. Take to heart your own mental and physical health. You have the power to change your circumstances to reduce or relieve burnout. **PM**



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