



THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF BURNOUT: WHAT ADDICTION PSYCHIATRY CAN TEACH US ABOUT PHYSICIAN RECOVERY

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Abstract

Burnout in medicine is often framed as a problem of excessive workload, insufficient resilience, or inadequate self-care. Yet exhaustion alone does not fully explain why clinicians may become emotionally numb, disconnected from meaning, ashamed of struggling, or unable to recover even when opportunities for rest arise. Addiction psychiatry offers a useful lens for understanding these patterns, without equating burnout with addiction.

This presentation examines physician burnout through the intersecting processes of reward, avoidance, shame, identity and environment. Chronic occupational demands can create a reinforcing cycle of depletion, emotional numbing, avoidance, disconnection and self-blame. At the same time, medicine's hidden curriculum may normalize self-neglect, presenteeism, emotional suppression and the belief that needing help reflects personal inadequacy. These implicit lessons can undermine formal messages about wellness and make recovery more difficult.

Principles drawn from addiction psychiatry suggest that sustainable recovery requires more than simply removing the stressor or advising clinicians to "take a break." Recovery involves rebuilding awareness, connection, identity, meaning and the capacity to experience reward outside relentless productivity. Practical strategies include sleep and lifestyle restoration, reflective practice, self-compassion, supportive relationships, psychological safety and healthier professional boundaries. Importantly, responsibility cannot rest solely with individual clinicians. Teams, leaders and health systems shape the environments in which coping and recovery occur. By shifting from a model of endurance to one of recovery, medicine can begin to create cultures in which physicians are supported not merely to keep functioning, but to remain connected to themselves, their colleagues and the work that brought them to medicine.

Biography

Devina Wadhwa, BSc (Pharm), MD, FRCPC, is a general psychiatrist and Assistant Professor at NOSM University whose clinical and academic work focuses on physician well-being, burnout, grief, mindfulness and the human dimensions of medicine. She practices in Northern and remote Canadian communities and brings a background in both pharmacy and psychiatry to her work. She is a Royal College psychiatry examiner, medical educator, writer and speaker. Her work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals and medical publications, including the Journal of General Internal Medicine. She is also the author of *What Lives Through Loss: On Grief and the Life that Continues*. Her teaching explores how clinical culture, professional identity, self-compassion and systems-level factors influence the well-being of physicians and trainees.