The health care industry is facing a potential epidemic of burnout.

In late 2015, the Mayo Clinic (in partnership with the American Medical Association) found more than half of American physicians now have at least one sign of burnout, a 9% increase from the group’s prior results in a study conducted three years earlier. Signs of burnout include fatigue and emotional exhaustion that result in depersonalization and detachment from work goals and meaning—and poorer interactions with patients.

Although burnout is a common syndrome in health care due to its many pressures, the Mayo study also noted that the quality of leaders and administration in a health care setting had a direct impact on levels of clinician wellbeing and satisfaction. But in a VITAL WorkLife study of more than 2,000 medical professionals, only 18.5% of respondents said their organizations helped them deal effectively with stress and burnout. “We have worked with physicians experiencing behavioral and performance issues, depression, a general lack of engagement or problems in their personal lives. The impact is alarming,” says Mitch Best, CEO of VITAL WorkLife, an employee assistance program (EAP) solutions provider and consultancy based in Minneapolis. The company works with clients to address healthier workplace cultures and employee wellbeing. VITAL WorkLife has quadrupled in size since Best started working there 14 years ago with his father-in-law, the founder. Best transitioned as owner and CEO in 2013, expanding the focus of the company from EAP to workplace behavioral health consulting across a variety of industries. A special focus on health care emerged in 2009 based on the team’s work with physicians. The complete portfolio of support services includes counseling, coaching, consulting and training for people at all levels of an organization. A national network of more than 50,000 counselors holding master’s and doctorate level degrees serves clients nationwide with in-person, phone or online resources. “Physicians are a precious resource and they are suffering,” Best says. “But it’s not like the television shows where inappropriate behavior or anger are tolerated. Our goal is to resolve conflict and build relationships internally between employees and leaders.”

In VITAL WorkLife’s 2015 study, causes of stress and burnout included health care reforms, paperwork and administrative demands and concerns about work/life balance. Impacts included a desire to retire early; leave the practice of medicine; or work fewer hours due to the personal impacts of fatigue, sleep problems and physical or mental ailments. At its worst, burnout can lead to situations of workplace aggression and violent behavior.

**Physician burnout: When you can’t ‘heal thyself’**

A health care practitioner epidemic that needs to be cured

**BY JOHN P. PALEN**

LESSONS IN BURNOUT

1. Watch for symptoms such as fatigue, irritability or apathy.
2. Model use of wellness programs to encourage time to participate.
3. Communicate performance expectations that include life balance.
4. Upgrade IT and administrative support systems to increase efficiency and self-directed time.
5. Offer third-party consulting or EAPs for specific employee needs.
6. Measure progress in improved employee satisfaction and productivity.
One respondent noted concerns over a national physician shortage if action isn’t taken to address burnout. Another said that primary health care has been reduced to a commodity that isn’t worth practicing in. Enhanced communication, improved workflow and a sense of understanding and support by administration were cited by health care professionals as key areas leaders should address. Improved clinician working conditions are aligned closely with patient safety and outcomes. Many industries have instituted one-on-one executive coaching as one solution to help professionals self-direct their wellness through mindfulness, values-based decision-making and working from strengths. As an EAP, VITAL WorkLife extends its services to family members — as defined by the employees — to support work/life balance. “Personal circumstances such as a family illness or death can have a huge impact on the employee culture,” Best says. The growth of companies like VITAL WorkLife demonstrates that leaders are paying attention to solutions to engage and retain their talent. The good news is that workplace burnout is treatable and can even be prevented.

**VITAL WORKLIFE**

**HEADQUARTERS:** Minneapolis  
**INCEPTION:** 2013  
**LEADERSHIP:** Mitch Best, CEO  
**EMPLOYEES:** 22  
**REVENUE:** Undisclosed  
**DESCRIPTION:** VITAL WorkLife is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) solutions, consulting and behavioral health solutions company, specializing in healthcare organizations and physician health and wellness nationwide  
**WEB:** vitalworklife.com

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