

Workplace Stress and the Healthcare Provider

By Pam Moyers Scott, MPAS, PA-C

The healthcare delivery system has undergone dramatic organizational changes over the past several years. As a result, healthcare providers (HCPs) are frequently required to provide more services within more stringent time constraints while receiving less compensation. This combined with other potential workplace difficulties (e.g., ambiguous job descriptions, limitations in advancement opportunities, complex managerial practices, inadequate staffing, shift work, and potential exposure to incurable infectious diseases) and/or personal problems (e.g., financial difficulties, intrapersonal conflicts, and an inability to achieve a satisfactory balance between career and family responsibilities) places HCPs at risk for stress related illnesses including



major depressive disorder, dysthymic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Signs, symptoms, and behaviors possibly indicative of a HCP suffering from workplace stress can involve psychological (e.g., irritability, anhedonia, depressed mood, sleep disturbances, memory problems, inability to concentrate, feeling overwhelmed, isolation, agitation, anxiety), physical (e.g., fatigue, appetite changes, pyrosis, other digestive problems, headache, other painful conditions, palpitations, and elevated blood pressure), performance (e.g., frequent absenteeism, changes in performance, procrastinating, and 'freezing under pressure'), and/or substance abuse (e.g., excessive alcohol consumption, increased tobacco usage, and self-medicating) complaints.

Unfortunately, workplace stress not only adversely affects the HCP, his or her co-workers, and his or her family members; it also has the potential to impact patient care. According to National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), these can include reduced patient satisfaction, misdiagnosis, and treatment errors. Therefore, it is essential that workplace stress be minimized as much as possible for HCPs to safely practice medicine by identifying the stressors, addressing underlying issues, and providing assistance and guidance. If the symptoms are severe, a comorbid psychological condition may develop, and/or the potential impact on patient care remains. The West Virginia Medical Professionals Health Program (WVMPHP) can assist the provider experiencing mental illness or substance use disorder to ensure he or she gets the necessary treatment, appropriate monitoring, and can safely return to the practice of medicine.



The WVMPHP activities are not limited to substance abuse. It also deals with mental illnesses including, but not limited to major depressive disorder, bipolar (I and II) disorders, generalized anxiety disorders (acute and chronic), post-traumatic stress disorder, attention deficit disorder, and other mood disorders.

If you feel you or a colleague has severe workplace stress related to mental illness or substance use disorder, contact WVMPHP's Executive Medical Director, P. Bradley Hall, MD, at 304-933-1030 (M-F, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm) for a confidential consultation.