

Study finds 80% of medical students feel low sense of personal achievement

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Despite the prestige of becoming a physician, 80 percent of medical students report a low sense of personal achievement, according to a new study in *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*.

Researchers surveyed 385 first- through fourth-year medical students to assess their levels of [burnout](#), a psychological syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to stressful work. Study authors say burnout has three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low sense of personal achievement.

"That 80 percent feel a low sense of achievement is a bit ironic, considering that these are all high-performing individuals," says Elizabeth Beverly, Ph.D., associate professor in [family medicine](#) at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine and lead author on this study. "However, it also makes sense in that they have gone from an environment where they were standouts to one where they are now on an equal academic playing field."

Beverly adds that each year of [medical school](#) has its own unique and significant stresses that prevent students from ever fully acclimating to the challenge. In year one, students are overwhelmed by the vast amount of knowledge they have to learn. In year two, they begin studying for board examinations. Year three sends students on clinical rotations to begin real world application of their knowledge. Year four is focused on graduation and matching into a [residency program](#).

"Throughout medical school there is always another test or requirement for students to prove themselves in a new way," says Beverly. "Over time that can feel quite discouraging."

Other areas of burnout

Beverly says only 2.3 percent of participants reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, while 17 percent reported high levels of depersonalization, a form of clinical detachment. Both of those dimensions of burnout are associated with higher perceived stress, poorer sleep quality and higher smartphone addiction scores.

Conversely, only higher perceived stress is associated with feeling a low sense of personal achievement. Beverly says she is still concerned about the role of smartphone addiction in [medical students](#) as 22 percent of participants met the basic score qualifying for smartphone addiction.

"I think the findings warrant additional research into how smartphone addiction can exacerbate burnout," says Beverly. "Increasingly, [medical education](#) incorporates smart devices, so we want to be mindful of how much we condition students to rely on them."

More information: Jennifer R. Brubaker et al, Burnout, Perceived Stress, Sleep Quality, and Smartphone Use: A Survey of Osteopathic Medical Students, *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* (2020). [DOI: 10.7556/jaoa.2020.004](https://doi.org/10.7556/jaoa.2020.004)

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