

Primary care physicians experience more burnout and anxiety than other health professions

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Dr. Debora Goetz Goldberg led the study, one of the few that have examined anxiety as a component of burnout and the rate of burnout among different professionals in a primary care practice. Credit: George Mason University

Clinician burnout is a growing public health concern, with the National Academy of Sciences reporting that 35-54% of U.S. nurses and

physicians exhibit substantial symptoms of burnout. New research led by the College of Health and Human Services at George Mason University found that health care professionals were more than twice as likely to report burnout with higher levels of anxiety and frustration than those who reported lower levels of anxiety and frustration. Additionally, primary care physicians reported burnout at twice the rate of other health care professionals in primary care practices.

Dr. Debora Goldberg, associate professor of health administration and policy, led the new study, published in the *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*, one of the few that have examined [anxiety](#) as a component of [burnout](#) and the rate of burnout among different professionals in a primary care practice.

"Burnout is a syndrome characterized by high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization, and a low sense of personal accomplishment from work," explains Goldberg. "It is important to understand how [health care professionals](#) respond to these changes and if certain groups are more likely to experience burnout and why. This is critical due to the tremendous amount of change taking place in the [health care industry](#), projected [physician](#) and nurse shortages, and most recently the extraordinary responsibilities placed on them during the COVID-19 pandemic."

The research team surveyed 1,273 healthcare professionals from 154 primary care practices in Virginia. They used the Change Diagnostic Index (CDI) to assess the participants' feelings, emotions, and attitudes following organizational and technological change.

They found that rates of burnout varied by profession in primary care practices. Physicians reported the highest rates of burnout at 31.6%, nearly twice the rate of other staff in these practices: 17.2% of advanced practice clinicians, 18.9% of clinical support staff, and 17.5% of

administrative staff.

Physicians who experienced increasing anxiety and withdrawal were more than three times as likely to report burnout compared to those who did not experience high levels of these domains. Anxiety was high across health care professionals and anxiety significantly raised the odds of burnout across health care professionals.

"This is not just a physician problem," explains Goldberg. "These findings tell us that we need to prioritize understanding and addressing clinician burnout at a system level and at a local level. The human cost as well as significant physician shortages expected in the future make this a critical public health concern."

The researchers suggest that a better understanding of how health care professionals respond to change and burnout can help guide programs and services to support individuals experiencing burnout and build strong work environments to prevent burnout among healthcare professionals in the future.

More information: Debora Goetz Goldberg et al, Indicators of Workplace Burnout Among Physicians, Advanced Practice Clinicians, and Staff in Small to Medium-Sized Primary Care Practices, *The Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.3122/jabfm.2020.03.190260](https://doi.org/10.3122/jabfm.2020.03.190260)

Provided by George Mason University

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