

Study provides evidence that peer-support groups can be beneficial in reducing health care worker stress and burnout

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Serving on the front lines in the arduous battle against the coronavirus, emergency department (ED) physicians are among the true heroes of the pandemic, working long, stressful hours at great personal risk, especially

in the many months before vaccines became available. A pilot study examining the feasibility, receptivity and preliminary effectiveness of peer-support groups for ED doctors during COVID-19 found this support provided potential benefit in terms of reduction of mental health stresses involved in emergency care during this time.

The researchers assessed change in symptoms of distress, depression and burnout before and after participating in virtual, group-based peer support for eight weeks. While historically physicians have low uptake of mental health resources, 86 percent of the doctors participating in the study indicated they would recommend peer support groups to a friend or colleague.

"Emergency departments have always been high stress environments and COVID at least doubled the stress," said study co-author and national leader in the study of medical symptoms Kurt Kroenke, M.D., of the Regenstrief Institute and Indiana University School of Medicine. "Stress on the job can lead to burnout and other negative consequences. It's an important question as to how we can help our health care workers under high stress conditions like COVID."

The pilot study reported a trend toward reduction of psychologic distress and burnout symptoms associated with working in [emergency care](#) when physicians came together virtually in peer support groups.

"That ED physicians were receptive to peer-support groups and found them helpful can be relevant to other clinicians working in the ED as well as other stressful medical environments such as intensive care units," said Dr. Kroenke.

"The physicians in our study came together in a group only a handful of times. This is a fairly low-cost intervention that health care systems could provide. Even with the pandemic now winding down, I think it

could be beneficial for health care workers in stressful situations across the board."

During this [pilot study](#), short versions of depression and anxiety screening tools co- developed by Dr. Kroenke, as well as burnout measurement screeners, were administered to ED physicians and their responses analyzed, revealing evidence of a trend toward decreased symptoms.

The study authors conclude, "Promising signs of improvement in distress, anxiety, depression, and burn out symptoms warrant additional studies with larger sample sizes and more robust research designs to establish the evidence base for peer support in the physician population."

"The use of peer support groups for emergency [physicians](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic" is published in *Journal of the American College of Emergency Physicians Open*.

More information: Jill Nault Connors et al, The use of peer support groups for emergency physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of the American College of Emergency Physicians Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/emp2.12897](https://doi.org/10.1002/emp2.12897)

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