

RED FLAGS

How can a physician tell if he or she may be struggling with mental health issues? There are plenty of potential red flags to watch for.

Physical Reactions

- Increased fatigue
- Sleep disturbance
- Headaches
- Appetite changes or upset stomachs
- Chronic muscle tension
- Sexual dysfunction

Emotional Reactions

- Feeling overwhelmed or emotionally spent
- Feeling helpless, inadequate, or vulnerable
- Increased mood swings
- Irritability
- Crying more easily and frequently
- Suicidal or violent thoughts or urges

Behavioral Reactions

- Withdrawal and isolation
- Restlessness
- Changes in alcohol or drug consumption
- Changes in personal or professional relationships

Cognitive Reactions

- Disbelief or a sense of numbing
- Replaying events in your head over and over
- Decreased concentration
- Confusion or impaired memory
- Difficulty making decisions or problem-solving
- Distressing dreams or fantasies

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH RED FLAGS

Several basic rules apply:

- Be aware of your own emotional reactions and distress when confronting others' traumatic experiences, and know what traumatic events may trigger your reactions.
- Connect with trusted colleagues and others by sharing your and their reactions to traumatic events.

- Maintain a balance between your professional and personal lives, with a focus on self-care (e.g., relaxation, exercise, stress management) to prevent, and lessen the effects of, work-related stress.

Individual physicians will have different ways of coping with stresses. Here are some practical strategies for preventing and reducing the effects of stress:

During Your Daily Routine

- Eat sensibly and regularly every day.
- Get adequate sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Be aware of your stress level, and take precautions against exceeding personal limits.
- Acknowledge your reactions to stressful circumstances, and allow yourself time to cope with these emotions.
- Stay involved with colleagues.

At Work

- Try to diversify tasks at work or vary your caseload.
- Delegate items that are appropriate for others to complete.
- Take breaks during the workday.
- Take vacation days.
- Use relaxation techniques (e.g., deep breathing) as needed.
- Talk to colleagues about stress you are feeling and how it affects you.
- Seek out or establish a professional support group.
- Recognize your personal limitations, and set boundaries with patients and colleagues.

Outside of Work

- Spend time with family and friends.
- Stay connected with others through community events, religious organizations, activities, and the like.
- Engage in pleasurable activities unrelated to work, especially those that foster creative expression (e.g., writing, art, music, sports).
- Be mindful of your own thoughts (especially cynicism) and feelings.
- Seek out the positive in difficult situations.
- Engage in rejuvenating activities such as meditation, prayer, or relaxation to renew your energy.
- Seek professional therapy if you cannot on your own overcome negative impacts on your self-esteem, quality of life, or relationships.
- Seek emergency care if you have suicidal thoughts or ideation.

(Health Care Toolbox, 2016)