

How to Improve Employee Engagement and Reduce Nurse and Physician Burnout

7 tips for healthcare employers to take a proactive approach.



With doctors gravitating towards high-paying specialties and the continued shortage of medical personnel, will nurse practitioners (NPs) or physician assistants (PAs) replace the primary care physician in the future? In some states, nurse practitioners can already open independent clinics where they diagnose and treat patients, and write prescriptions. Like it or not, this controversial practice could cure many of our burgeoning healthcare issues.

The Effects of Stress Among Healthcare Workers

Employee burnout and loss of engagement is a huge concern in the industry. The US Department of Labor estimates stress costs American businesses \$300 billion annually¹. Constant stress and exhaustion from being overworked leads to everything from mistakes, accidents, illness, disease, and even death.

A recent study found that nurses in overcrowded hospitals were more likely to be depressed than those with more manageable workloads²; another report indicates that female nurses reporting high levels of stress were up to 35% more likely to suffer the effects of heart disease than their non-stressed counterparts³. The same holds true for other health-care staff including doctors, nurse practitioners, and support staff.

When continuously exposed to a heightened level of stress, employees become disenchanted with their job, leading to everything from conflicts and transfer requests, to extended leaves of absence, and

turnover. However, there are simple and cost-effective ways to prevent these problems.

What is Nurse Burnout and Physician Burnout?

Burnout can occur in any profession, but it is particularly common among healthcare workers, specifically nurses and doctors. Stress can often times be confused with burnout, but they have key differences. When healthcare workers experience burnout that means they are physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. Long stressful shifts, putting others first, and regularly dealing with sickness are some of the top reasons nurses and physicians experience burnout.

Here are 7 tips to help you improve employee engagement and reduce burnout in your workplace.

1. Stress Reduction Education

Lifestyle education and stress-reduction classes can help significantly. Available both online and in person, quality programs are customized to meet the needs of the institution and the individual.

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To get staff interested in taking these classes, provide plenty of support and praise for their efforts. You may also consider offering incentives to attendees.

Lastly, remember that everyone learns and deals with stress differently. Offer counseling services, and encourage employees to make use of them. The unbiased ability of a counselor to listen and provide fresh solutions can give employees a lifetime of relief, not just help with the current situation.

2. Employee Recognition and Reward Programs

Employees often lose interest and suffer burnout because they feel unappreciated. Therefore, anything from a simple 'thank you' or 'how was your day?' to giving small rewards can alleviate the frustration.

To capitalize on recognition programs, create a complete program with graduated reward systems and various options. Small gift certificates to a local coffee shop, spa or movie theater can be a great start towards rewarding employees. You may even consider larger prizes for longer-term efforts; however, these are only a temporary fix. At the end of the day, material gifts are appreciated, but cannot compensate for being overworked or under-appreciated in general.

3. Office Relaxation Room

When situations get extremely stressful, finding new scenery and taking a few moments to breathe will decrease stress levels, lower blood pressure, and, usually, cooler heads will prevail. Employers could also further facilitate dedicated spaces with comfortable seating, yoga mats, and plants.

Eye masks and ear plugs are awesome tools that could allow healthcare professionals recharge for fifteen minutes. By providing healthcare staff with a dedicated spot to relax and re-focus, employers can expect more productive and engaged employees.

4. Employee Wellness Support Program

Healthcare employees are often stressed by situations and problems they can't deal with alone, but are hesitant to ask for help. By putting a mentoring or buddy system in place, each person always has someone to go to for support.

This can be extremely beneficial in healthcare and in other situations, including education, training and recertification, as well as for companies under-going periods of reorganization, or implementing new techniques or procedures.

5. Upper-Level Support and Encouragement

Supervisors and management-level leaders hold a lot of influence when it comes to making their employees happy and easing stress. Simply listening to employees and offering encouragement can often be enough. Providing constructive and positive feedback can be a great help, but also take time to dissect the problem and make appropriate changes.

These methods help upper management, too. The floors run much more smoothly, and the processes become more efficient. Helping others feel better and successfully solving problems will also improve job satisfaction at management levels.

6. Education, Training and Job Confidence

A large source of stress for workers in the

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health-care industry is the feeling of being inadequate in their work⁴. Unfamiliar practices and procedures take longer to perform and may have to be repeated more often. This takes even more time, resulting in further increases to workload and stress levels for the employee, and lower productivity, increased overtime expense, and other stress-related costs for the employer.

To ensure job confidence, provide employees at all levels opportunities for continued education and training. As an employer, you will enjoy the positive effects associated with happy workers as well as the increased efficiency, safety, and productivity brought about by new techniques.

7. Bring In Additional Help

The above techniques implemented on their own will not compensate for overworking your employees. Vacation and personal time are vital for work-life balance and

overall employee well-being. Unfortunately, the absences that result from employee time off can add to the workload for others and compound your stress problem.

Bring in qualified relief as needed. These workers should already have a solid understanding of the industry, be pleasant, and work well in new environments to keep stress levels as low as possible. The best way to accomplish this is by having your own relief workers or hiring from a reputable and reliable healthcare staffing agency.

Contact Soliant to find out more about staffing, hospitalist programs, and other contingent solutions to burnout and declining employee engagement.

1 Mental Capital and Wellbeing: Making the most of ourselves in the 21st Century (PDF) -- Government Office for Science

2 Nurses at crowded hospitals more likely depressed' -- Reuters, (Source study printed Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, May 4, 2010)

3 "Stressed Women "Risk Heart Disease" -- Nursing in Practice, May 6, 2010

4 "Rational Thinking and Stress Management in Health Workers: A Psychoeducational Program," International Journal of Stress Management, Talma Kushnir, Ruth Malkinson and Joseph Ribak

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