

Coping With Stress After an Adverse Patient Outcome

Question

Following an adverse patient outcome, healthcare providers may experience significant stress that can affect their personal and professional lives. How can providers manage this stress?

Answer

A survey of more than 3,000 physicians in the United States and Canada showed that about 90 percent had been involved in incidents ranging from near misses to serious errors. Most of the respondents reported feeling some degree of stress related to these events. Further, estimates suggest that half of all clinicians will be involved in serious adverse events during their careers.¹

When an adverse patient outcome occurs, healthcare providers may feel blame, shock, guilt, shame, anger, failure, depression, inadequacy, and a loss of confidence and reputation. Ineffective coping mechanisms might worsen these feelings, which can further affect provider well-being and potentially lead to subsequent errors.

By acknowledging and proactively managing the adverse outcome—stress—error cycle, healthcare providers can take steps toward effectively coping with the situation. As part of this process, consider the following steps:

1. Participate in peer review and/or root cause analysis.

An adverse outcome can be an opportunity to analyze the system in which you practice — and your personal performance — to determine whether changes should be made to prevent a recurrence.

Identifying underlying factors (system or human) that may have contributed to the outcome is critical for implementing changes in the care delivery system (institutional or personal) to prevent similar circumstances.

2. Speak with the patient and/or family.

Healthcare professionals recognize their ethical responsibility to disclose unanticipated outcomes resulting from treatment. However, providers often feel uncomfortable and anxious discussing adverse outcomes with patients and/or families.

Their reluctance is justifiable based on uncertainty about appropriate approaches to such discussions and fears of litigation. Yet, when done properly, disclosure can reduce the negative impact of adverse outcomes and support a culture of transparency and safety.

To learn more, see MedPro's *Disclosure of Unanticipated Outcomes* guideline. For assistance with a specific disclosure issue, contact your MedPro Group patient safety and risk consultant or claims representative, or discuss the situation with your hospital/group practice risk manager or patient safety officer.

3. Keep reasonable hours.

Practitioners who are involved in an adverse outcome often resolve in their minds that “this will never happen again,” and pursue self-improvement to ensure that it never will.

However, it can be problematic when, in an effort to perform better, practitioners demand even more of themselves (particularly working more hours). This personal pressure can result in fatigue, which may increase the likelihood of another adverse outcome.

4. Emphasize people skills.

If you are anxious, fearful, or dissatisfied, you may have trouble relating well to your patients. These feelings can impair the provider–patient relationship and might damage the environment of mutual trust that is critical to effective communication and good outcomes. Acknowledging your emotions and working to connect and engage with patients can help with stress management.

5. Work on personal relationships.

Similarly, your personal relationships may suffer during this period of emotional distress. Consciously focus on staying “connected” to those close to you; they can be a valuable source of support as you navigate through the process of coming to terms with an adverse outcome.

Discussing the facts and specific details related to the patient, patient care, and outcomes in any case should be limited to contexts and situations that are protected from legal discovery (e.g., discussions with your defense counsel or professional liability claims manager). However, expressing your personal feelings and concerns to a spouse, a trusted friend, or a colleague can help reestablish your emotional equilibrium.

6. Maintain balance in your personal and professional life.

Most people realize the benefits of maintaining work–life balance. However, during a time of emotional turmoil, maintaining a “balanced” lifestyle is even more critical. At the very least, try to feel well physically.

7. Monitor consumption of controlled and uncontrolled substances.

Be cognizant that during times of emotional stress, some individuals have a tendency to improperly self-medicate or abuse alcohol. You may find it prudent to consult a physician if the emotions resulting from an adverse outcome are significantly affecting your sense of well-being.

8. Seek counseling.

Many practitioners who have sought therapy agree that it was very helpful. A therapist can help you recognize negative emotions and identify ways to manage stress.

Resources

- [MedPro Group: Disclosure of Unanticipated Outcomes](#)
- [MedPro Group: Healthcare’s Second Victims: A Problem That Should Not Be Ignored](#)
- [MedPro Group: Litigation Support: Maintaining Your Balance](#)
- [MITSS: Medically Induced Trauma Support Services](#)

- [Physician Litigation Stress Resource Center](#)
- [Stanford Medicine: Coping with Adverse Patient Outcomes](#)

¹ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2016, July). *Patient safety primer: Support for clinicians involved in errors and adverse events (second victims)*. Retrieved from <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primers/primer/30/support-for-clinicians-involved-in-errors-and-adverse-events-second-victims>

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