

Question:

Following an adverse patient event, it's not unusual for a healthcare provider to have trouble sleeping at night or have other symptoms of stress. How can a provider manage the stress related to an adverse patient event?

Answer:

The emotional impact that a healthcare provider experiences following an adverse patient event may include shock, denial, shame, anxiety about future errors, loss of confidence, trouble sleeping, anger, financial worries, and depression. Resultant stress combined with ineffective coping mechanisms also might potentially contribute to subsequent errors.

Acknowledgement and proactive management of the adverse event–stress–error cycle can help the practitioner effectively cope with the situation. As part of this process, consider the steps outlined in this document.

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

The occurrence of an adverse event can be viewed as an opportunity to analyze the system you practice in — and your personal performance — to determine whether changes should be made to prevent a recurrence.

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

2. Speak with the patient and/or family.

Healthcare professionals have long recognized their ethical responsibility to disclose unanticipated outcomes stemming from treatment. Nonetheless, providers often feel uncomfortable engaging in this type of discussion with patients.

This document should not be construed as medical or legal advice. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

The Medical Protective Company and Princeton Insurance Company patient safety and risk consultants provide risk management services on behalf of MedPro Group members, including The Medical Protective Company, Princeton Insurance Company, and MedPro RRG Risk Retention Group.

Their reluctance is justifiably based on uncertainty about appropriate formats for such discussions and fear of litigation. 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.

3. Keep reasonable hours.

Practitioners who are involved in an adverse event often resolve in their minds that “this will never happen again,” and set upon a course of self-improvement to ensure that it never will.

The problem is that sometimes, in an effort to perform better, they become even more demanding of themselves (particularly from the standpoint of hours). This can result in fatigue, which may increase the likelihood of another event.

4. Reassure yourself via formal and informal second opinions and consultations.

As mentioned above, one of the common effects of stress is loss of confidence in one’s professional abilities. During this uncomfortable time, you may benefit from the advice of trusted colleagues on the tough cases.

Seeking consultations may help ensure that the patient is getting the best care possible. Also, as you see your colleagues agreeing with your handling of the case, the clear message is sent that you really are a competent practitioner.

5. Emphasize people skills.

Anxious, fearful, dissatisfied providers obviously will have difficulty relating well to their patients. This impairment of the provider–patient relationship will almost certainly damage the environment of mutual trust that is so critical to effective communication and good outcomes. Realize that you may not be yourself right now, and work on “connecting” well with your patients.

6. Work on personal relationships.

Similarly, you can expect your personal relationships may suffer during this time of emotional distress. Consciously work on staying “connected” to those close to you; they can be a valuable source of support as you work through the process of accepting this unanticipated event.

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Although you need to be very circumspect in discussing the facts of the case (you generally want to limit these discussions to contexts that are protected from legal discovery), expressing your feelings to a spouse, a trusted friend, or colleague can be very helpful in reestablishing your emotional equilibrium.

7. Maintain balance in your personal and professional life.

Most people realize the benefits of maintaining work–life balance. Yet, at this time of emotional upheaval, it is even more important to maintain a “balanced” lifestyle. At the very least, try to feel well physically.

8. Monitor consumption of controlled and uncontrolled substances.

Be mindful of the fact that, at times of emotional distress, there may be a tendency to improperly self-medicate. It may be wise to consult with a physician if the symptoms of adverse event stress are significantly impairing your sense of well-being.

9. Seek counseling.

Most practitioners who have seen a therapist agree that it was extremely helpful. A therapist can help you recognize negative emotions and identify ways to work through stress.

Resources:

- Medically Induced Trauma Support Services — http://www.mitss.org/clinicians_home.html
- The Physician Stress Litigation Resource Center — <http://physicianlitigationstress.org/>

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