

# The Stress Effects on the Mental Health of Female HealthCare Workers: Burnout Factors and Solutions

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## ABSTRACT

The historically male-dominated medical field has more recently been replaced with a female majority of workers. While now most women make up the medical field, they are also usually the significant caregivers for their families. This dual responsibility may increase stress, burnout, and quality of life concerns. This begs the question: Do women in the medical profession experience higher levels of stress and burnout compared to their male counterparts, and what are some solutions to this issue? I posit that women in medicine experience higher levels of stress, burnout, and quality of life issues due to pressures to exceed expectations both in work and home life. Pressure on all healthcare workers is undeniable, especially with the recent pandemic, but literature research points to women being more negatively affected. In addition to home and work responsibilities, female healthcare workers also did much of the direct patient care during the pandemic with high exposure rates to the virus and they continue to service challenging patient cases today. Analyzing the causes, impacts, and coping mechanisms that female healthcare professionals encounter will be examined through the review of literature studies, a self-report survey by medical professionals, and an interview with Doctor Leigh Frame of the GW Resiliency and Well-Being Center at George Washington School of Medicine and Health Sciences. She discussed how stress and burnout in medical professionals can be alleviated.

## Introduction

The topic of burnout in healthcare workers fascinates me because I want to be a physician. Realizing that the job is stressful, especially for women, incentivizes me to find out as much as I can about work-related burnout. According to Mass General Brigham Hospital: Employee Assistance Program, “Research indicates that those in healthcare are impacted by burnout more than those who work in other industries.” Further, the American Medical Association released data showing 57% of female physicians reported burnout in 2022 versus 47% of their male counterparts. This paper aims to explore female healthcare workers' quality of life, stress, burnout, resiliency, and wellness and find possible solutions.

## Factors Leading to Burnout in Female Medical Professionals

Some factors contributing to burnout include workload, repeated exposure to helping families with stressful decisions, patient suffering, working with complex patients, and balancing work and personal responsibilities. The pandemic increased stress and burnout for healthcare workers, and women healthcare workers were especially hard hit.

## Contributing Factors Leading to Burnout

Burnout is defined as a combination of symptoms that affect individuals differently. Common symptoms include pain, headaches, digestive issues, exhaustion, and interrupted sleep. In addition to physical symptoms, there are also

psychological and emotional factors such as anxiety, depression, anger, and substance misuse. Contributing factors leading to burnout in medical professionals are both work related and personal. There are excessive workloads with long hours and inadequate staffing. Healthcare workers complain of the bureaucracy and never-ending paperwork associated with the job. They work in very high pressure environments with tight time constraints and face life or death decisions everyday. Coupling these stresses at work with trying to maintain a personal life at home is a major juggling act. A work-life balance is hard to achieve, especially for females who are often the primary caregivers in their families.

## Far Reaching Repercussions of Burnout

Burnout in medical professionals may not just affect the individual healthcare worker. Repercussions of burnout also affect job performance, resulting in apathy and loss of ability to empathize and connect with patients. Burnout impacts more than just the individual. It also affects patient care and the entire healthcare system when medical professionals experience burnout, sometimes leading them to leave the field all together. High turn-over rates, job dissatisfaction, and resulting shortages of medical professionals affects us all. Women healthcare workers may be at increased risk for burnout and quality of life distress.

## Burnout Affects Women Healthcare Workers in Particular

According to *The Comprehensive Review: Well-Being of Women*, a review of 71 studies on women in health care, women experience more stress and burnout than their male counterparts. It is reported, “Due to the varying roles that women play in society, they are more prone to experiencing mental health issues brought on by immense pressure and stress to succeed both at home and at work simultaneously.” In addition to holding down professional healthcare jobs, women are typically the primary caregivers at home. This includes caring for children and elders and domestic responsibilities like cooking, shopping, chauffeuring, and other required daily tasks.

## Methods

- Review of literature
- Self-report Survey
- Interview with Dr. Frame

A review of literature studies on healthcare professionals' well-being was conducted in 26 countries between 1979 and 2022. All studies enrolled adult women, ages 18 to 74, including nurses, physicians, clinical social workers, and mental health providers. Healthcare Dive reports, “For the review, researchers studied healthcare professionals’ well-being — their integrated mental and physical health as it relates to life satisfaction, sense of purpose and ability to manage stress — and absence of well-being, or burnout.”

In addition to reviewing literature studies on healthcare workers’ stress comparing male and female burnout, a self-report survey was created to obtain and assess data related to burnout in healthcare workers, comparing female versus male respondent’s answers. Participants were asked to respond to the following prompts by choosing one of the following: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree.

- 1.I feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy in relation to my job.
- 2.I have negative thoughts about my job.
- 3.I have mental health resources available to me through my work.
- 4.I feel stress both at home and at work.

5. I feel misunderstood or unappreciated by my co-workers.
6. I feel that I have no one to talk to about work-life balance.
7. I feel that I am achieving less than I should at work.
8. I feel that I am achieving less than I should at home.
9. I feel I have a balance between my work and home life.
10. I think gender impacts feelings about work/life balance.
11. I feel that I am in the wrong profession.
12. I am frustrated with parts of my job.
13. I feel that organizational politics or bureaucracy impair my ability to do a good job.
14. I feel that there is more work to do than I can practically complete.
15. I have the time needed to do a quality job at work.
16. I have the time needed to do a quality job at home.
17. I think home duties impact how well I can do my job.
18. What is your professional role/title in healthcare?
19. Please elaborate more on any of the above questions if desired here.

The third research method used to gather information about female versus male stress in healthcare workers was an interview conducted with Dr. Leigh Frame, Executive Director of the Office of Integrative Medicine and Health and Associate Director and Cofounder of the GW Resiliency & Well-being Center at the GW School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

## Results/Discussion

The literature analysis results on the research question of whether women healthcare professionals experience more stress and burnout than male counterparts are listed below:

- Women working in health care endure a significantly higher level of stress and burnout compared to their male counterparts.
- In 25% of the studies, women in healthcare said work-life integration fueled dissatisfaction. Women said they were encouraged to prioritize the needs of their children and families over their own personal and professional development, even when they earn higher incomes than their partners.
- Another 25% of the literature review articles found limited autonomy and poor working conditions contributed to women's burnout levels. Women are more likely than men to feel "powerless" and constricted by time pressures.
- Women also spend more emotional energy on complex patients than male colleagues according to the study analysis.
- Healthcare workers with increased childcare responsibilities were 80% more likely to report burnout.

Additional statistics from Nursing Marketplace Platform ShiftKey found:

- 86% of women in healthcare reported burnout compared to 66% of males.
- ShiftKey also reported that 53% of female nurses said they were more likely to consider leaving the field due to burnout, versus 32% of their male counterparts.

The American Medical Association released data showing:

- 57% of female physicians reported burnout in 2022, vs. 47% of male physicians.

The Bureau of Labor and Statistics reports that 78% of workers in the US healthcare and social assistant sector are female.

The US Surgeon General issued an advisory in 2022 declaring that burnout has increased since the start of the pandemic as providers cope with higher workloads and hostile work environments. They proclaimed that combating provider burnout must be a priority for the healthcare system. Since many healthcare workers identify as female, addressing the causes of burnout as it relates to women is imperative.

These statistics conclude with the need for evidence-based interventions to enhance well-being and resilience among women in healthcare.

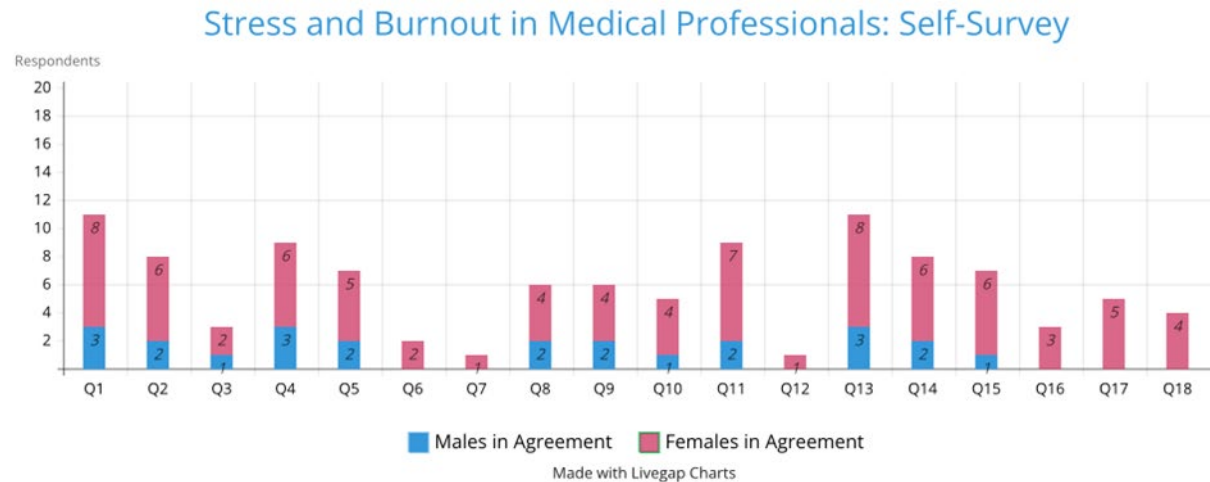
## Results For Survey: Stress And Burnout In Medical Professionals: Self-Survey (Responses)

There were 11 respondents - 8 women and 3 men who were asked 18 questions as listed below:

1. What do you identify as?  
100% of females answered “female”; 100% of males answered “male”
2. I feel run down and drained of physical or emotional energy in relation to my job  
75% of women agree with this statement versus 66% of men agree.
3. I have negative thoughts about my job  
45.5% of people responded with ‘neutral’. The remaining respondents were split between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’.
4. I have mental health resources available to me through my work  
Approximately 82% of all respondents agreed.
5. I feel stress both at home and at work  
63% of women agree with this statement versus 66% of men.
6. I feel misunderstood or unappreciated by my co-workers  
25% of women agree with this statement, and no men agree.
7. I feel that I have no one to talk to about work-life balance  
12.5% of women agree, and no men agree with this statement.
8. I feel that I am achieving less than I should at work  
44% of women agree, 66% of males agree
9. I think that I am achieving less than I should at home  
44% of women agree, 66% of males agree
10. I feel I have a balance between my work and home life  
44% of women agree, 33% of males agree
11. I think gender impacts feelings about work/life balance  
78% of women agree, 66% of males agree
12. I feel that I am in the wrong profession  
11% of women agree, no males agree
13. I am frustrated with parts of my job  
100% of males and females agree, and 78% of females strongly agree
14. I feel that organizational politics or bureaucracy impair my ability to do a good job  
54.5% of women agree, 66% of males agree
15. I feel that there is more work to do than I can practically complete  
67% of women agree, 33% of males agree
16. I have the time needed to do a quality job at work  
33% of women disagree, 33% of males disagree
17. I have the time needed to do a quality job at home  
22% of women disagree, 66% of males disagree
18. I think home duties impact how well I can do my job  
44% of women agree, no males agree

\*64% of respondents are physicians while 36% of remaining respondents held administrative roles or left the question blank.

**Table 1.** Stress and Burnout in Medical Professionals: Self-Survey Results



Some notable results from the self-survey indicate more women than men feel run-down by their job, more women than men feel that they do not have a work-life balance, and more women than men believe there is more work to do than they can practically complete. These statistics support the hypothesis that women in healthcare professions experience greater stress than their male counterparts.

In August 2024, an interview with Dr Leigh Frame, Director of the GW Resiliency Center at George Washington University was conducted. Dr Frame stressed the importance of Integrative Medicine and how all aspects of a person's life - physical, emotional, professional, and personal, affects our well-being. Dr Frame's research at the Center uses metrics to assess the healthcare of medical professionals at GW. She wonders the best way to measure well-being vs. the lack of well-being or burnout. Her research often focuses on what makes it harder for women in healthcare professions in particular to maintain well-being and what institutions can do to support them. Her team conducts an annual survey on the well-being of the GW University employees. There are two implementations:

**Table 2.** WHO-5 Well-being Index

### WHO-5 Well-being Index

Please respond to each item by marking <b>one box per row</b> , regarding how you felt in the last two weeks.		All of the time	Most of the time	More than half the time	Less than half the time	Some of the time	At no time
WHO 1	I have felt cheerful in good spirits.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
WHO 2	I have felt calm and relaxed.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
WHO 3	I have felt active and vigorous.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
WHO 4	I woke up feeling fresh and rested.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
WHO 5	My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0

#### Scoring:

The raw score is calculated by totaling the figures of the five answers. The raw score ranges from 0 to 25, 0 representing worst possible and 25 representing best possible quality of life.

To obtain a percentage score ranging from 0 to 100, the raw score is multiplied by 4. A percentage score of 0 represents worst possible, whereas a score of 100 represents best possible quality of life.

Regional Office for Europe WHO. Use of Well-Being Measures in Primary Health Care - The DepCare Project. Health for All, Target 12, 1998 [<http://www.who.dk/document/e60246.pdf>]

Bech P. Measuring the dimensions of psychological general well-being by the WHO-5. QoL Newsletter 2004; 32: 15-16.

**Table 3.** ERI - Effect Reward Imbalance Survey Questions

		<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
<b>ERI1</b>	I have constant time pressure due to a heavy work load.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI2</b>	I have many interruptions and disturbances while performing my job.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI3</b>	I have a lot of responsibility in my job.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI4</b>	I am often pressured to work overtime.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI5</b>	My job is physically demanding.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI6</b>	Over the past few years, my job has become more and more demanding.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI7</b>	I receive the respect I deserve from my superior or a respective relevant person.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI8</b>	I experience adequate support in difficult situations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI9</b>	I am treated unfairly at work. <b>Reverse coding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI10</b>	My job promotion prospects are poor. <b>Reverse coding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI11</b>	I have experienced or I expect to experience an undesirable change in my work situation. <b>Reverse coding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI12</b>	My employment security is poor. <b>Reverse coding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI13</b>	My current occupational position adequately reflects my education and training.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI14</b>	Considering all my efforts and achievements, I receive the respect and prestige I deserve at work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI15</b>	Considering all my efforts and achievements, my job promotion prospects are adequate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ERI16</b>	Considering all my efforts and achievements, my salary / income is adequate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dr Frame said it's important to ask medical professionals what they are struggling with in their lives, both personally and professionally. Based on past surveys, her group tries to focus on one specific issue each year and offers workshops and podcasts related to a specific theme. For example, sleep struggles and how stress impacts them were a recent focus of employee assistance.

Dr Frame also said well-being cannot be assessed in a vacuum. By offering support with multiple aspects of well-being based on responses to previous employee surveys, the GW Wellness and Resiliency Center sees improved outcomes for participants. Support for employees emphasizes that a holistic lifestyle focus includes sleep, exercise,



nutrition, and counseling. Participants are reminded that to be well, one must include a combination of healthy lifestyle goals. Both confidential and group support are available. Dr Frame notes that not all hospitals offer their employees comprehensive support programs.

When asked about her own experience as a female with work-related stress, Dr Frame acknowledged that women physicians who came before in a very male-dominated field often experienced prejudice. She noted that for her, many superiors who were women sometimes made life difficult. She thinks because women in medicine had to fight for advancement and seniority, they sometimes felt threatened by new women coming up. She notes that women helping women in the healthcare profession would go a long way in relieving workplace stress. Competition can be fierce in healthcare, exacerbating the stress for women workers. She responded yes when asked if she felt more pressure to succeed as a doctor because she is a woman. “There is a need to prove yourself and succeed to advance”. Women who are also juggling childcare have an added stressor. She also thinks stress can be positive as it pushes one to grow and learn. A “just enough” challenge to strive but not too much stress to burnout is a delicate balancing act to achieve. Dr Frame was asked what specific stressors affected her as a female physician. She responded that childcare is one of the most challenging things female physicians face. “I’ve had it easier because I don’t have children. What I observe is that a lot of family child care falls on women. They must leave work early for pickup or take days off if they have a sick child. Women also leave their jobs temporarily for pregnancy or put off doctorate work until after they have children. All of this puts them behind peers who don’t have these interruptions. There is more pressure on women who have families than on men in our society.” Dr. Frame goes on to say that we need to establish realistic expectations to share family responsibilities with partners and our “village.”

Dr Frame was asked if she ever felt burned out in her job, and if she was comfortable asking for help to cope. Dr Frame responded, “I grew up in a world where it wasn’t OK to talk about mental health struggles. You were expected to suck it up and push forward. My partner encouraged me to seek help when the stress became obvious. I was blind to my own mental health needs, and I’m a mental health professional!”

She goes on to say, “It’s Ok to ask for help; it’s important you know you are not alone. We are here to help in our GW community, and it’s a free service. Free is important because people don’t want insurance knowing they are asking for help as this may become a pre-existing condition in their medical records. There is a mental health stigma related to your job as a medical professional. Isn’t it amazing that people aren’t afraid to seek medical help but hesitate to seek help for mental health?” Dr Frame adds, “Here at GW, new residents have an automatic appointment with us during work hours. Everyone comes to see us at the Center, and this reduces the stigma. They get to know us, so they’ll be more likely to use services if they need them. This normalizes it.” When asked about resources, professional mentorship, and grievance assistance at GW, Dr Frame shared there is a mix of these supports but just because they are there doesn’t mean they will be utilized. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) are free, but if employees don’t know what is available to them, and don’t know how to access services, then they won’t take advantage of them. It’s important that the information is in one place. In addition to the Center, Dr Frame says at GW, their chaplains, spiritual supporters who often help patient families, are also available to employees to talk and listen. Many hospital chaplains are good listeners and people may be comfortable opening up to them with their problems. They are not designated as mental health providers, but they do know what resources might be available for hospital employees, and they work confidentially.

One final point Dr Frame shared was her interest in research ethics. She feels mental health research needs to be usable and the data collected from participants in studies should be applied to help people. Of course funding research is the key to finding answers and then additional funding is required to implement programs.

## Conclusion

There is rising concern about women’s mental health due to dual pressure at home and work. As primary care-givers in families, and also being healthcare professionals, women in particular experience significant stressors to their quality of life. Many factors contribute to this problem. Gender equity in healthcare settings is often skewed to favor



males, who often hold positions of authority and seniority. Male healthcare workers are less often the primary caregivers of their families and are therefore given more time to devote to their profession. In addition, male healthcare workers do not take extensive maternity leaves. There is often a lack of autonomy for women in their jobs relating to promotion and advancement. Women have a more challenging time balancing work-life integration because they are always expected to give 100% effort at home and in their jobs. In addition to caring for their children, women are also expected to handle other responsibilities, such as caring for their partners and parents, cooking, shopping, chauffeuring and housework.

Supportive work environments are essential to all workers, especially females, if they are to integrate a work-life balance. Well-being resources such as counseling, mindfulness meditation, and support groups should be available to healthcare workers. Unfortunately, there is often a stigma attached to asking for help around stress and burnout in the workplace. Healthcare institutions are encouraged to adopt an open culture that supports mental health, moving away from stigma and promoting well-being initiatives. The stigma associated with mental health care, particularly in licensing and credentialing processes, poses a barrier to seeking help for burnout. Healthcare workers are often afraid to ask for help because they worry it will impact their job advancement in the future. There's a recognized need for tailored support for historically marginalized groups within healthcare, such as minorities and women, who face unique stressors.

Gender inequality impacts many aspects of professional and personal life. The purpose of this paper is to focus on how gender inequality affects the well-being of medical professionals specifically. Employee Assistance Programs in medical work centers must provide resources that workers can access without fear of damaging their professional standing. Education is vital to help change the attitude that seeking help for stress and burnout is a weakness. The welfare of medical professionals and the general public depends on this. Mental health is health, and treating people holistically is an essential consideration for all of us.

## Limitations

One limitation in my research was that I was unable to acquire a larger sample of respondents for the self-report survey.

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