



- [Home](#)
- [SF STAT!](#)
- [Current Articles](#)
- [CURRENT ISSUE](#)
- [Online Newspapers](#)
- [WEEKLY NEWSLETTERS](#)
- [Media Kit](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Business Directory](#)
- [Video Interviews](#)
- [Contact](#)

Select Page

# Physicians: In Search of Mental Wellness II

By Rafael Fernandez, Jr., MD

As mentioned in my last article, the DCMA is taking care of their members by launching a wellness program to help them cope with mental health issues, which were exacerbated by the Pandemic. Suffering from mental health issues is erroneously perceived in a negative fashion as well as a sign of weakness. These misconceptions create unnecessary barriers to individuals in seeking treatment, which is detrimental to the individual as well as society. These misconceptions do not discriminate and affect people from all social, ethnic, and

religious groups, including physicians. In a study by the American Medical Association (AMA), healthcare professionals treating COVID-19 patients on the frontlines have been overworked and are emotionally exhausted, leading to dangerous levels of physician burnout and depression.

Mental health issues affect a sizable portion of our population and the pandemic as well as the lingering effects of the pandemic, continues to burden society by affecting non health care workers as well as healthcare workers, including physicians. Millions of people still suffer from chronic stress, fear, grief, isolation, prolonged exhaustion, long-haul symptoms, and burnout. Based on the Lyra Health 2022 State of Workforce Mental Health report, 63% of participants experienced stress; 54% anxiety; 25% depression.

Another study presented by Kaiser Family Foundation identified that 4 in 10 adults in the United States reported symptoms of anxiety or depression. The study also found that 36% of respondents had trouble sleeping, 32% experienced eating disorders, and documented a 12% increase in substance abuse. It is estimated that COVID-19 has affected the mental health of 59% of individuals in United States.

A survey by Jackson Physician Search documented that the available services are not enough to address the needs of those suffering from mental health issues and the effects of the pandemic only stress the system more. This lack of resources also affects healthcare professionals in this area.

To deal with these situations, the AMA published a comprehensive guide, *Caring for Caregivers*. Among other things, the guide suggests self-assessment tools, setting up a free and anonymous hotline, providing access to meditation and sleep applications, creating an online toolkit with links to additional resources, and educating physicians about their right to receive treatment without feeling embarrassment.

The DCMA is taking an active role to help the physicians in our community who may need assistance in dealing with the rigors of the profession. As a benefit to our members, we have launched the Life Bridge: Physician Wellness Program. The developers of the program are aware that privacy as well as confidentiality are paramount. Assistance is available 24/7 to those physicians who need assistance. We have professionals available to help physicians identify and address the issues which produce anxiety and stress in order to decrease burnout and depression as well as to improve their quality of life. Our goal is to help maintain a healthy physician workforce so they in turn may help maintain a healthy society.

*The Physician Wellness Program can be reached at (888) 948-9555. For more urgent needs, please dial 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 988 or 1-800-273-8255.*

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