

# System-Level Wellness Strategies in Healthcare: Where to Begin?



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In today's demanding healthcare environment, addressing burnout among healthcare professionals is imperative for ensuring quality patient care and sustaining a resilient workforce. Research into the drivers of burnout has underscored the need for systematic, organization-wide strategies to effectively mitigate this issue. Simply offering occasional wellness programs or superficial initiatives won't suffice. Instead, organizations must start with a comprehensive assessment of healthcare workers' needs at various levels, as outlined in the journal article, "Beyond Burnout: A Physician Wellness Hierarchy Designed to Prioritize Interventions at the System Level" by DE Shapiro and colleagues. The researchers in this article posed the idea that while Maslow's traditional hierarchy states that humans are motivated by unmet needs, physicians and healthcare professionals are motivated by the need to care for their patients.

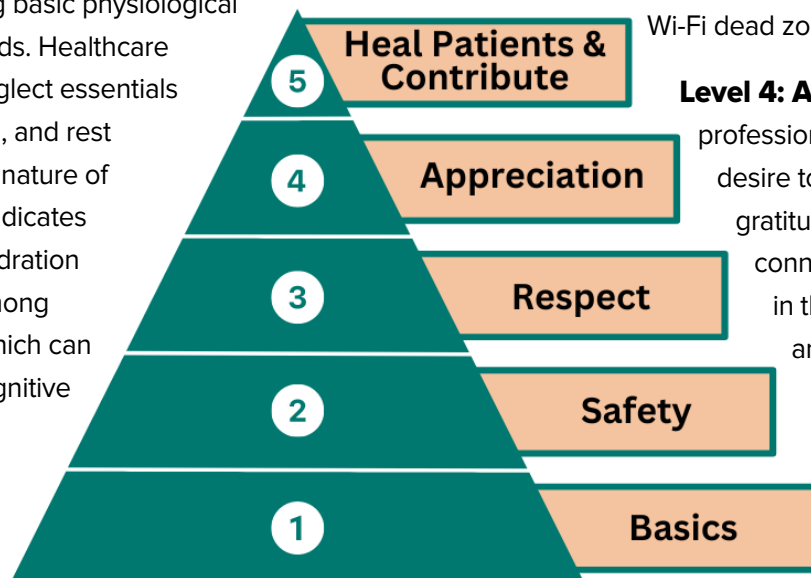
**Level 1: Basics.** The foundation of well-being begins with addressing basic physiological and mental health needs. Healthcare professionals often neglect essentials like hydration, nutrition, and rest due to the demanding nature of their work. Research indicates alarming rates of dehydration and irregular meals among healthcare workers, which can significantly impact cognitive function and mood. Furthermore, mental health resources must be not only available

but actively promoted, given the high rates of depression and suicide among physicians. Embedding mental health professionals within healthcare units can facilitate easier access and destigmatize seeking help.

**Level 2: Safety.** Safety concerns, including workplace violence and inadequate staffing, are prevalent in healthcare settings. High-risk areas, such as emergency and psychiatric care, require enhanced security measures. Job security is also a critical factor, particularly with the closure of hospitals in rural areas leading to downsizing. Addressing these safety and security issues is essential to fostering a supportive work environment.

**Level 3: Respect.** Respect from coworkers, supervisors, patients, and leadership is fundamental for healthcare professionals. Lack of respect can impede productivity and job satisfaction. Disruptive behavior within teams and patient disrespect contribute significantly to burnout. Respect for personal time is also crucial, considering the burden of administrative tasks like electronic health record (EHR) charting and technological challenges within healthcare systems, such as early logout times on devices or Wi-Fi dead zones.

**Level 4: Appreciation.** Healthcare professionals often resist the desire to receive thanks or gratitude, but appreciation and connection are much needed in their work. Recognition and gratitude play a vital role in boosting morale. Feeling interconnected with colleagues and patients contributes to job satisfaction.



Adequate compensation is also an expression of appreciation for the demanding work physicians and healthcare professionals undertake.

**Level 5: Healing Patients and Contributing at the Fullest Ability.**

In Maslow's final tier of the traditional hierarchy, he discusses self-actualization and the notion that even if all other needs are met, someone may still feel discontent if the person is not doing what they are passionate about. The pinnacle of the Health Professional Wellness Hierarchy is centered around the fulfillment of healing patients and contributing effectively. Healthcare professionals strive for autonomy and resources to practice medicine or advance research. However, bureaucratic burdens can detract from this core motivation, leading to dissatisfaction and burnout.

To combat burnout effectively, organizations must undertake a systematic assessment of physicians' and healthcare professionals' needs across these hierarchy levels. This assessment should involve direct input from physicians, advanced practice providers, nurses, support staff, and others impacted by burnout. Intervention strategies should prioritize addressing lower-level needs first before advancing to higher-level interventions. Importantly, interventions may vary across departments within the same healthcare institution, necessitating tailored approaches.

Leadership involvement is critical for the success of burnout prevention initiatives. Organizational leaders must champion wellness programs and advocate for resources to support healthcare professionals. Direct interaction with the CEO and physicians must take place to discuss the challenges physicians and their teams are facing. Naming the issue and acknowledging it at the highest level creates trust that the problem is recognized, and individuals are willing to work on it.

Creating a culture that values and prioritizes staff well-being requires visible commitment and sustained effort from leadership.

In addition to assessing needs and engaging leadership, implementing evidence-based practices is crucial.

Effective strategies may include:

- Implementing flexible scheduling to promote work-life balance.
- Providing comprehensive mental health support and resources.
- Enhancing workplace security measures in high-risk areas.
- Instituting peer support programs to foster camaraderie and mutual respect.
- Recognizing and rewarding exemplary performance and dedication.
- Streamlining administrative tasks to allow more time for patient care.

By adopting a holistic approach guided by the Health Professional Wellness Hierarchy, healthcare organizations can cultivate environments that prioritize staff well-being, enhance job satisfaction, and ultimately improve patient outcomes. It's time to move beyond superficial strategies and embrace comprehensive, system-level interventions to combat burnout in healthcare.

The LifeBridge Nebraska program presented an educational webinar discussing both individual and system-level strategies to approach wellness and burnout in healthcare.

To watch the full presentation, scan the QR code here.



REFERENCES:

Shapiro DE, Duquette C, Abbott LM, Babineau T, Pearl A, Haidet P. Beyond Burnout: A Physician Wellness Hierarchy Designed to Prioritize Interventions at the Systems Level. *The American Journal of Medicine*. 2019;132(5):556-563. doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2018.11.028