



### **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention is dedicated to saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide. Because physicians have higher rates of suicide than the general populations, and play an important role in addressing this major public health problem and leading cause of death in the US, AFSP is committed to helping the medical field make advancements in research, education, policy and culture surrounding physician and other healthcare professional mental health and suicide prevention.

AFSP's commitments in suicide prevention are based in research. Physicians report several barriers to seeking mental health care, including time constraints, hesitancy to draw attention to self-perceived weakness, and concerns about reputation and confidentiality. Research also shows:

- Suicide generally is caused by the convergence of multiple risk factors — the most common being untreated or inadequately managed mental health conditions.<sup>1,2</sup>
- An estimated 300–400 physicians die by suicide in the U.S. per year.<sup>3</sup>
- Physicians who took their lives were less likely to be receiving mental health treatment compared with non-physicians who took their lives even though depression was found to be a significant risk factor at approximately the same rate in both groups.<sup>4</sup>
- The suicide rate among male physicians is 1.41 times higher than the general male population. And among female physicians, the relative risk is even more pronounced — 2.27 times greater than the general female population.<sup>5</sup>
- Suicide is the second-leading cause of death in the 24–34 age range (accidents are the first).<sup>6</sup>
- Twenty-eight percent of residents experience a significant depressive episode impacting health and functioning to some extent during training versus 7–8 percent of similarly aged individuals in the U.S. general population.<sup>7</sup>
- Among physicians, risk for suicide increases when mental health conditions go unaddressed, and self-medication may occur as a way to address anxiety, insomnia or other distressing symptoms. Although self-medicating may reduce some symptoms in the short-term, the underlying health problem is not effectively treated and risks for substance abuse and disinhibition increases with self-medicating. This can lead to a tragic outcome.
- In one study, 23 percent of interns had suicidal thoughts. However, among those interns who completed four sessions of web-based cognitive behavior therapy, suicidal ideation was nearly 50 percent less.<sup>8</sup>
- Drivers of burnout include workload, work inefficiency, lack of autonomy and meaning in work, and work-home conflict.
- Unaddressed mental health conditions, in the long run, are more likely to have a negative impact on a physician's professional reputation and practice than reaching out for help early.



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Mental health problems are best addressed by addressing individual and institutional practices and policies, where help-seeking and mental health treatment is made accessible and non-punitive. AFSP's commitment to reducing physician burnout, depression and suicide over the past 15 years has focused on these strategies:

- Convening the Consensus Group on Physician Suicide leading to the 2003 JAMA article *Confronting Depression and Suicide in Physicians: A Consensus Statement*.<sup>3</sup>
- Interactive Screening Program (ISP)- This program was developed and is licensed by AFSP and effectively helps training programs, medical schools and hospitals to reach staff and trainees who are most at risk and help individuals to overcome barriers to help-seeking. Key features of ISP are the choice to remain anonymous during screening and dialogue, making it “safe” for distressed individuals to engage and receive a referral to mental health treatment.
- Providing, in collaboration with ACGME and the Mayo Clinic, [resources](#) for suicide prevention (4-minute video) and for addressing the aftermath of suicide (*After A Suicide: A Toolkit for Residency/Fellowship Programs*).
- Reducing the stigma that prevents physicians from seeking help, through the 2008 video series “*Struggling in Silence: Physician Depression and Suicide*” and “*Out of the Silence: Medical Student Depression and Suicide*.” These films were endorsed by former US Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher and won the 2009 FREDDIE Award for best educational documentary film, and have been used broadly in medical education settings over the past decade.

The truth is that physicians who proactively address their mental health are better able to optimally care for patients and sustain their resilience in the face of stress. Optimizing wellness and overall mental health of health care providers can play a key role in reducing the suicide rates of both medical professionals and the general population.

More information on AFSP's work on physician suicide prevention can be found at <https://afsp.org/our-work/education/physician-medical-student-depression-suicide-prevention/>