



## THE WELLNESS CONNECTION

# Recognizing and supporting distressed physicians and learners

Medical professionals are caring, dedicated and resilient; however, most individuals experience stress and fatigue at some point in their career. Indeed, physicians, residents and medical students are at an increased risk of burnout, depression and suicidal ideation. When medical professionals are in distress, their usual response is to push through the difficulty: they want to continue to care for patients, and they don't want to let their colleagues down. Prioritizing patients and pushing forward are common — even encouraged — within the culture of medicine. **As physicians and learners, it's important for you to be able to recognize signs of distress — both in yourself and in your colleagues — and to be prepared to respond appropriately.** Distress manifests uniquely from person to person, but there are indicators of distress that are important to be aware of and to look out for.

Approaching someone in distress can be uncomfortable, so this resource also provides practical recommendations for how to respond to colleagues in distress, along with a comprehensive list of physician-specific resources that you can offer as additional support.



## Recognizing signs of distress

Distress manifests uniquely in different people, and physicians are well practised in managing their outward emotions, but here are some concerning indicators to look for in yourself and in your colleagues:

### Physical indicators

- Deterioration in physical appearance and/or personal hygiene
  - Excessive fatigue, exhaustion (e.g., falling asleep at work)
  - Statements about changes in appetite (e.g., lack of or increased appetite)
  - Statements about changes in sleep (e.g., lack of or increased sleep)
  - Visible cuts, bruises or burns
  - Excessive sweating
  - Frequent or chronic illness (e.g., headache, stiff neck, shoulder and back ache)
  - Confusion, disorganization, rapid or slurred speech
  - Lack of eye contact
  - Shakiness, tremors, fidgeting, twitching or pacing
  - Increased substance use (e.g., tobacco, marijuana, stimulants, alcohol)
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### Behavioural and emotional indicators

- Expressions of severe anxiety or irritability
- Direct statements demonstrating distress (e.g., family problems, loss, financial problems, career concerns)
- Difficulty controlling emotions (e.g., crying, short temper, uncontrolled anger, aggressive comments)
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness (e.g., low self-esteem, loss of interest, no sense of purpose)
- Loss of sense of humour
- Excessively demanding or dependent behaviour
- Withdrawal from peers, family, society
- Lack of concentration
- Reduced motivation
- Indecisiveness and poor judgment



If an individual is exhibiting any of the following safety risk indicators, they may pose an immediate danger to themselves. **Act quickly by offering them contact information for their provincial physician health program (PHP; see details below) or call 911 for immediate assistance if outside of PHP hours.**



### Safety risk indicators

- Written or oral statements that mention despair, suicide or death
- Severe hopelessness, helplessness, depression, social isolation and withdrawal
- Statements about “going away for a long time”
- Written or oral expressions of a desire to injure or kill someone else

If an individual is exhibiting any of the following emergency indicators, **call 911 and ask for immediate assistance.**

### Emergency indicators

- Engaging in self-harm or acting in a physically or verbally aggressive way toward other people, property or animals
- Unresponsive to the external environment (e.g., they are incoherent or passed out)
- Demonstrating a severe disturbance of cognitive, behavioural or emotional functioning
- Displaying disruptive behaviour that appears to be out of control
- Behaving in any other way that feels threatening or dangerous to you

**References:** Content adapted from the following sources: More Feet on the Ground “Calls to action: Recognize”: <https://morefeetontheground.ca/calls-to-action/recognize/>; AMA Steps Forward “Physician suicide and support”: <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward/module/2702599>

## Supporting distressed colleagues

If you have identified a colleague in distress, reach out and speak to them directly. Choose a private, comfortable location to talk (if in person) at a time that's convenient for them. When speaking with your colleague, be sure to listen empathetically, be friendly, open, approachable and trustworthy, offer your support and direct them to professional resources. Here are some specific steps to follow:

- When you have time, and when you feel ready, reach out to your colleague.
- Begin the conversation by asking your colleague how they're feeling. ("How have you been feeling?" "Are you alright?")
- Express your concerns about specific behaviours or patterns of behaviours that you have observed and ask permission to discuss the problem. ("I'm concerned about XXX. I wonder if we could talk about XXX?")
  - If your colleague is reluctant to speak with you, leave the door open to connect when they feel ready. ("Please call me if you ever want to chat.")
- Emphasize the importance of maintaining personal well-being. ("Seeking care is not selfish; you deserve to be healthy and well." "Seeking help for your own challenges can also help improve the care you provide to your patients.")
- Listen empathetically and encourage them to speak by asking open-ended questions. ("How are things?" "What happened?" "Tell me more about that."). Refrain from relating their situation to your own experiences.
- Minimize judgment and resist the righting reflex — it's not up to you to solve their problems.
- If there are signs of safety risk or emergency, directly ask the individual if they're considering suicide. ("Tell me, have you been thinking about suicide?")
- Restate what you've heard, emphasize your concern and show that you care. ("Thank you for sharing with me. I'm concerned about XXX and would like to help get you back on a healthy path. What do you think would help?")
- Provide information about professional resources and make it clear that they can get help confidentially. ("I know the PHP folks and they're really good at helping us physicians work through these kinds of situations in a confidential manner." "Many PHP services are free or offered at a low cost.")
- Emphasize autonomy/choice. ("Which of these mental health resources do you think might be most helpful to you?" "It's ultimately up to you to decide.")
- Encourage the use of personal supports. ("Friends and family can help in these times. What supports do you have?" "Is there someone you can talk to or be with?" "What's helping or what has been helpful for you in the past when you were going through a stressful time?")
- Discuss the importance of maintaining the basics. ("Some personal strategies that could help improve your mood are eating healthily, getting adequate sleep and exercising.")
- Summarize a plan for change. ("It sounds like you recognize that XXX. Specifically, you plan to XXX.")
- Acknowledge and support your colleague's courage in disclosing a personal difficulty. ("I know that talking about XXX can be difficult. I appreciate your willingness to share with me.")

- Honour, validate and normalize their emotions. Let them know they're not alone. ("You're not alone. Practising medicine is tough. Most physicians feel stressed, burned out or depressed at some point in their career.")
- Offer hope. Let them know that what they're experiencing is temporary and treatable. ("People have shown improvements with appropriate support." "I know things may seem impossible now, but things will get better.")
- Keep the door open. Let your colleague know you would like to check in to see how they're doing in a day or two and be sure to follow up with them at that time. ("I'd really like to hear how things are going with you. Would you feel comfortable with me checking in?")
- When following up, ask how things have been going with the change plan you discussed previously. ("Have you had a chance to reach out to your family physician?" "Have you contacted your PHP?")
- Only break confidentiality if the individual is at an imminent risk.
- Be sure to maintain your own mental health by establishing boundaries and prioritizing self-care.

**References:** Content adapted from the following sources: More Feet on the Ground "Calls to action: Respond": <https://morefeetontheground.ca/calls-to-action/respond/>; AMA Steps Forward "Sample script for approaching distressed physicians": <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward/module/2702599#resource>; Well Doc Alberta "Helping each other through the pandemic: Providing informal physician-to-physician peer support": [https://bb31a78a-5cf6-4d5b-950e-8d7723740e07.filesusr.com/ugd/021036\\_7b5cc31fc84a4297a52f2c1e06e412e1.pdf?index=true](https://bb31a78a-5cf6-4d5b-950e-8d7723740e07.filesusr.com/ugd/021036_7b5cc31fc84a4297a52f2c1e06e412e1.pdf?index=true); "6 Tips for Supporting a Colleague: LISTEN" developed by Jon S. Novick [not available online].

## Resources and referral

*Familiarize yourself with the resources available to physicians and learners. Encourage colleagues to reach out to their provincial physician health program if they need personal assistance or are experiencing distress, and make sure to do the same if you need support.*

**For immediate assistance call 911 or Canada Suicide Prevention Service at 1.833.456.4566**

## ALBERTA

### Physician and Family Support Program

- Available 24 hours a day (Provides some service to Yukon)
- 877-767-4637 (toll free)
- [pfsp@albertadoctors.org](mailto:pfsp@albertadoctors.org)
- [www.albertadoctors.org/services/pfsp](http://www.albertadoctors.org/services/pfsp)

Alberta's Physician and Family Support Program (PFSP) offers a 24-hour assistance line operated by an external contractor to maintain confidentiality. You can discuss personal and professional problems with a physician who understands the issues that affect physician health — and will work with you to identify the best resources for your needs. In addition, PFSP can help you access a province-wide network of qualified counselling professionals. Long-term support and resource coordination are also available.

### Distress Line – Canadian Mental Health Association Edmonton

- Available 24 hours a day
- 780-482-HELP (4357; Edmonton) or 800-232-7288 (toll free) for rural areas

## BRITISH COLUMBIA

### Physician Health Program

- Available 24 hours a day
- 800-663-6729 (toll free)
- [info@physicianhealth.com](mailto:info@physicianhealth.com)
- [www.physicianhealth.com](http://www.physicianhealth.com)

A master's-level intake counsellor will identify your needs and arrange a phone appointment with a program intake physician, who will help further clarify your goals. The program also gives physicians, trainees and their dependents access to a limited number of in-person or over-the-phone counselling or coaching sessions per year at no charge. Services are available to any registrant with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia.

### BC Crisis Centre Distress Line

- Available 24 hours a day
- 604-872-3311 (Greater Vancouver)
- 866-661-3311 (toll free; Lower Mainland and Sunshine Coast)
- or 800-SUICIDE (800-7842433) (toll free; BC wide)

## MANITOBA

### Doctors Manitoba Physician Health and Wellness Program

- Physician and family support
- Available 24 hours a day
- 844-436-2762 (toll free)
- [www.docsbwellness.org](http://www.docsbwellness.org)

### MD Care

- Access to psychiatric care
- 204-480-1310

### Physicians At Risk Hotline

- 24-hour confidential telephone answering service
- 204-237-8320
- Physicians At Risk is a free, confidential peer assistance program offering you and your family assistance with social, marital, financial, behavioural or chemical dependency issues.

### Manitoba Suicide Prevention & Support Line

- Available 24 hours a day
- 877-435-7170 (toll free)

## NEW BRUNSWICK

### NBMS Wellness

NBMS Wellness provides support to physicians and their families who may be coping with the demands of practice, relationships, addiction and other mental health or life challenges.

NBMS Wellness offers tailored counselling solutions including an extensive qualified provider network of counselling and referral services in communities across the province. NBMS Wellness also offers [peer-to-peer mentoring](#) and [MD4MD](#) for physicians seeking their own primary care provider.

- Please contact Meaghan Sibbett at 506-875-6749 or email [msibbett@nbms.nb.ca](mailto:msibbett@nbms.nb.ca).
- [www.nbms.nb.ca/physicianwellness/](http://www.nbms.nb.ca/physicianwellness/)



## NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

### Physician Care Network

Newfoundland & Labrador Medical Association offers two assistance programs for members and their families: InConfidence and MDLink.

#### InConfidence

This program offers round-the-clock, toll-free access to trained counsellors and online resources. It provides monitored referrals and, for additional fees, a substance abuse program. There is no formal program for emergencies.

- Available 24 hours a day
- 877-418-2181 (toll free)
- 709-726-7424 for login details
- [nlma@nlma.nl.ca](mailto:nlma@nlma.nl.ca)
- [www.nlma.nl.ca/Wellness/InConfidence](http://www.nlma.nl.ca/Wellness/InConfidence)

#### MDLink Primary Care Program

- 800-563-2003 (toll free)
- 709-726-7424
- [mdlink@nlma.nl.ca](mailto:mdlink@nlma.nl.ca)
- [www.nlma.nl.ca/Wellness/MD-Link](http://www.nlma.nl.ca/Wellness/MD-Link)

This program matches physician patients with family physician providers. You can refer yourself to this program by contacting the MDLink coordinator. This is not an urgent or emergency service.

#### Newfoundland and Labrador Mental Health Crisis Line

- Available 24 hours a day
- 709-737-4668 (St. John's)
- 888-737-4668 (toll free; province wide; same number for Mobile Crisis Response Team – St. John's Region)

## NOVA SCOTIA

### Doctors Nova Scotia Professional Support Program

- 855-275-8215 (toll free)
- 902-468-8215
- [professionalsupport@doctorsns.com](mailto:professionalsupport@doctorsns.com)
- [doctorsns.com/benefits/professional-support](https://doctorsns.com/benefits/professional-support)

Expect a response within two business days and an appointment within three or four days, depending on urgency and your schedule.

### Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team – Nova Scotia

- Available 24 hours a day
- 888-429-8167 (toll free)

## ONTARIO

### OMA Physician Health Program

- Available 8:45 am to 5:00 pm weekdays  
(Confidential voicemail monitored by program staff outside these hours)
- 800-851-6606 (toll free)
- [php.oma.org](http://php.oma.org)

The Ontario Medical Association (OMA) Physician Health Program offers an array of services to OMA members. Highly trained, master's-level intake staff will respond by phone, email or in person depending on your situation and the nature of your request. The program's medical physicians supervise calls and are available to speak to you.

### ConnexOntario

- Available 24 hours a day
- 1-866-531-2600 (toll free)
- <https://www.connexontario.ca/>

ConnexOntario provides free and confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol and drugs, mental illness and/or gambling. It is funded by the Government of Ontario.

## PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

### MSPEI Physician Health Program

- Confidential support
- Available 24 hours a day
- 800-663-6729 (toll free)
- [mspei.org/salary-and-employee-benefits/salary-and-employee-benefits-physician-health-program](https://mspei.org/salary-and-employee-benefits/salary-and-employee-benefits-physician-health-program)

This program supports and advocates for PEI physicians, resident doctors and medical students as well as their partners and dependent children. Individuals can get support with relationship and workplace issues, mental health, career and life transitions, substance use, concerns for colleagues, burnout, stress management and conflict resolution, and financial issues.

## QUEBEC

### Quebec Physician Health Program

- Available 8:45 am to 4:45 pm weekdays
- Available 9 am to 5 pm weekends and statutory holidays
- 514-397-0888 (Montreal area)
- 800-387-4166 (toll free; elsewhere in Quebec)
- [info@pamq.org](mailto:info@pamq.org)
- [www.pamq.org/en](http://www.pamq.org/en)

During weekday office hours, requests by phone and email are passed on to a physician advisor who will identify problems, determine needs, recommend appropriate resources and make individual referrals for evaluation and treatment. For urgent matters, a physician advisor is on call (voicemail with call back) weekdays from 8 am to 8 pm and on weekends and statutory holidays from 9 am to 5 pm.

This confidential service is not an emergency service.

## SASKATCHEWAN

### SMA Physician Health Program

- Available 8 am to 5 pm
- 800-667-3781 (toll free; in province)
- 306-244-2196
- [www.sma.sk.ca/programs/44/physician-health-program.html](http://www.sma.sk.ca/programs/44/physician-health-program.html)
- [brenda.senger@sma.sk.ca](mailto:brenda.senger@sma.sk.ca) (Director of Physician Support Programs)

On first contact, you'll discuss your concerns and decide whether referral to an outside agency or direct intervention by the program is best for your circumstances. Further contact may involve a triage assessment of you (and your family). A treatment plan will be established after assessment.

Confidential contact or referrals can be accessed through the program director at the Saskatchewan Medical Association or through any committee member.