

# Healing the Healers: Tools to Tackle Stress and Burnout

Understanding burnout, building resilience, and creating supportive teams

by Jess Wurtz, LCSW



## Session Overview: A Roadmap to Recovery and Resilience

### Three Core Focus Areas

Three core focus areas guiding today's session to ensure comprehensive coverage of recovery and resilience strategies

### Identifying Burnout Signs

Identifying burnout signs specific to infection prevention work, recognizing early warning indicators in yourself and colleagues

### Mental Health Strategies

Practical mental health strategies for immediate relief, actionable techniques you can implement today and ongoing

### Organizational Support Systems

Organizational tools to create sustainable support systems that foster long-term resilience and well-being

## Learning Objectives: What You'll Take Away Today

### Three Core Focus Areas



#### Identify Burnout Signs

Identify signs and symptoms of burnout unique to infection prevention work.



#### Apply Mental Health Strategies

Apply mental health strategies to manage stress and build resilience in high-pressure environments



#### Implement Organizational Strategies

Implement organizational strategies to support team mental health and prevent burnout

### Definition of Burnout

A chronic condition characterized by three key components working together to create overwhelming workplace stress and disengagement from professional responsibilities

### Emotional Exhaustion

Feeling drained and depleted of emotional resources, unable to recover despite rest, manifesting as persistent fatigue and loss of enthusiasm for work

### Depersonalization

Detachment from patients and colleagues, adopting a cynical attitude, and viewing interactions as purely transactional rather than meaningful connections

### Reduced Personal Accomplishment

Questioning your impact and value, experiencing decreased productivity and confidence in your abilities, and doubting your professional competence

Note: Burnout is a chronic condition, not just acute stress.

## The Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive Warning Signs

**Physical Signs**  
Chronic fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, weakened immune system

**Emotional Signs**  
Irritability, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, loss of motivation

**Cognitive Signs**  
Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, impaired decision-making

**Behavioral Changes**  
Withdrawal from colleagues, increased absenteeism, reduced work quality

## Burnout Manifests Uniquely in Infection Prevention Roles

- Constant vigilance creates mental fatigue
- Always on alert for outbreaks
- Fear of personal infection and bringing pathogens home to family
- High-pressure environment with life-or-death consequences
- Isolation - often small teams with limited peer support
- Lack of visible wins

Prevention success is invisible because what didn't happen goes unnoticed

## The Pitcher Who Never Leaves the Mound: A Healthcare Analogy

**Pitch Count = Your Capacity**  
Your daily energy and emotional capacity are like a pitcher's pitch count. Everyone has a limit, and ignoring it leads to injury, just like in baseball.

**Getting Pulled = Asking for Help**  
Asking for help or handing something off equals being pulled from the game. This is not failure—it's smart management that protects your wellbeing.

**The Bullpen = Your Support Network**  
Your colleagues, leadership, counselors, and EAP exist as your bullpen. They're there so you don't have to carry every burden alone.

**The Offseason = Recovery Time**  
Vacation time and breaks are your offseason—not times to catch up on work, but genuine recovery periods so you come back stronger.

### Arm Injuries = Burnout

Arm injuries from overuse represent burnout. A pitcher who ignores pain and keeps throwing loses their career. Why do we expect healthcare workers to do it?

## Real-Life Recognition: Case Studies from the Field

**Case Study 1**  
IP professional experiencing nightmares about missing an outbreak after a high-stress incident, struggling with persistent anxiety and hypervigilance in their role.

**Case Study 2**  
Team member avoiding colleagues and skipping meetings after COVID-19 surge, demonstrating social withdrawal and difficulty re-engaging with work activities.

**Case Study 3**  
Veteran IP specialist questioning career choice after 15 years of service, experiencing burnout and loss of confidence in their professional identity.

What signs do you recognize in yourself or colleagues?

## Part 2: Mental Health Strategies - Your Personal Toolkit

**Immediate Stress Relief**  
Evidence-based approaches for immediate stress relief when pressure builds

**Long-Term Resilience**  
Building long-term resilience through daily practices and habits

**Cognitive Strategies**  
Cognitive strategies to reframe challenging situations and thoughts

**Desk-Side Techniques**  
Practical techniques you can use during your workday, right at your desk

# MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES FOR IMMEDIATE STRESS RELIEF

## Deep Breathing Exercises

- 5-5-5 Inhale for 5, Hold for 5, and Exhale for 5.
- Double Breath
- There is no magic to numbers when breathing. Do what works for you.
- Get oxygen to your brain
- Calm your amygdala

## 1 Minute Somatic Release

Undenlch your jaw

Drop your shoulders

Shake your hands out

Move your eyes side to side

Stick your tongue out and exhale

Take 3 deep belly breaths

@Breathe.Burn.Rise

## GROUNDING WITH YOUR FIVE SENSES

- 5 THINGS YOU CAN SEE  

  - SUN near
  - PICTURE ON THE WALL
  - PEOPLE WALKING
- 4 THINGS YOU CAN FEEL  

  - WIND
  - BLOWING FEET ON THE FLOOR
  - PENCIL IN HAND
- 3 THINGS YOU CAN HEAR  

  - BIRDS CHIRPING
  - CLICK TYPING
  - CAR HORNS
- 2 THINGS YOU CAN SMELL  

  - FOOD FROM THE CAFETERIA
  - LAUNDRY DETERGENT ON CLOTHES
  - FRESH CUT GRASS
- 1 THING YOU CAN TASTE  

  - MINT Bye, most
  - TOOTHPASTE

## Grounding exercises

- The 5-4-3-2-1 sensory awareness method to anchor in the present

## How to Practice Body Scan Meditation

Body Scan Meditation: Why Use It & How to Practice

- Step 1: Find a quiet space and a comfortable position
- Step 2: Take deep breaths
- Step 3: Release judgment and refocus as needed
- Step 4: Begin to scan each area
- Step 5: Scan the body as a whole
- Step 6: Close with gratitude

choosing therapy

## Body Scan Meditation

- Check in with your body throughout the day.

## Cognitive Reframing: Managing Negative Thoughts and Emotions

### Identify Automatic Negative Thoughts

Notice the common negative thoughts that arise in infection prevention roles without judgment. Simply observe them as they occur.

### Challenge Catastrophic Thinking

Ask critical questions: What's the evidence? What else could be true? Examine your thoughts objectively to reduce distortion.

### Reframe Your Perspective

Shift from 'I'm responsible for everything' to 'I do my best with the available resources and information.' Acknowledge your efforts.

### Focus on What You Control

Separate what you can control from what you cannot. Direct your energy wisely toward the areas within your sphere of influence.

## Daily Self-Care Practices That Build Long-Term Resilience

### Sleep Hygiene

Aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep. Maintain a consistent sleep schedule and create a screen-free wind-down routine to prepare your body for rest.

### Movement

Commit to 30 minutes of daily physical activity. Even a simple walk counts as a powerful stress relief tool that benefits both body and mind.

### Nutrition

Eat regular meals and stay hydrated throughout the day. Limit caffeine and alcohol dependency to maintain stable energy levels and emotional balance.

### Social Connection

Maintain relationships and connections outside of work that truly nourish you. These bonds provide essential emotional support and perspective.

### Creative Outlets and Hobbies

Engage in creative pursuits and hobbies unrelated to healthcare. Building an identity beyond your work strengthens resilience and personal fulfillment.

## Practical Coping Mechanisms for Managing Work Stress

**Progressive muscle relaxation**

Systematically release tension held in your body

**Gratitude journaling**

Write down three things daily, no matter how small or simple

**Emotional release strategies**

Journaling, talking to a trusted colleague, physical activity like running or dancing

**Boundary-setting scripts**

Practice scripts to protect your personal time without guilt

### End-of-day transition rituals

Help you leave work stress at work and arrive home present

## Part 3: Organizational Strategies - Creating a Culture of Support

### Leadership's Critical Role

Preventing burnout through visible commitment and modeling healthy work-life boundaries sets the tone for organizational culture

### Systemic Approaches

Implementing protections that safeguard entire teams rather than relying solely on individual coping mechanisms ensures sustainable practices

### Peer Support Systems

Building community networks reduces isolation and normalizes vulnerability, creating spaces where employees feel supported by colleagues

### Realistic Expectations

Setting sustainable workload boundaries and achievable goals prevents accumulation of stress and demonstrates organizational respect for well-being

### Psychological Safety

Creating environments where discussing mental health is encouraged and without consequences builds trust and enables early intervention

## Leadership's Role in Fostering a Supportive Work Culture

### Regular Mental Health Check-ins

Normalize the conversation and show genuine care for your team members' wellbeing beyond work performance metrics.

### Provide Mental Health Training

Equip all team members with skills to recognize and respond to burnout, fostering a culture of mutual support.

### Model Healthy Boundaries

Leaders set the tone by demonstrating self-care practices and maintaining healthy work-life boundaries personally.

### Recognize Sustainable Practices

Reward sustainable work practices, not martyrdom or overwork, to reinforce the value of long-term wellbeing.

### Allocate Actual Resources

Invest in mental health support programs and professional development opportunities with meaningful budget allocation.

### Lead With Empathy

Acknowledge the emotional toll of infection prevention work openly and validate team experiences and challenges.