



Strength behind the mask: Supporting resilience in healthcare workers

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ABSTRACT

Healthcare professionals are integral to the effective operation of health systems. Despite their commitment, many experience persistent stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Although resilience is frequently perceived as an individual characteristic, it is equally influenced by organizational support and workplace conditions. This editorial underscores the necessity of redefining resilience as a systemic responsibility. By fostering environments that cultivate resilience, healthcare systems not only safeguard their workforce but also improve patient outcomes and the overall efficacy of health systems.

Keywords: resilience; healthcare workers; burnout; occupational stress; workplace wellbeing

Healthcare professionals, including nurses, doctors, and support staff, constitute the foundational structure of every health system. They deliver care under conditions that are both emotionally and physically demanding. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these professionals encountered unprecedented levels of stress. A global study indicated that over 40% of healthcare workers experienced mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Pappa et al., 2020). The concept of “resilience” is increasingly prevalent in healthcare discourse. However, it is often characterized as a personal attribute, thereby placing undue pressure on individuals to “remain strong.” Frequently overlooked is the significant role of the workplace environment in cultivating resilience. It is imperative to shift the focus and advocate for resilience as a collective, systemic priority.

Recent research underscores the critical importance of prioritizing resilience as a systemic concern. A global meta-analysis conducted by Janitra et al. (2023) revealed that approximately one in four healthcare professionals exhibited low resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this rate is lower than that observed in the general population, it nonetheless raises significant concerns regarding the sustainability of the healthcare workforce. Notably, the study identified that frontline healthcare workers were significantly more likely to experience low resilience, thereby highlighting the substantial emotional burden associated with direct patient care under crisis conditions. Concurrently, another study by the same authors examined the positive aspects of resilience, particularly the role of psychological interventions in enhancing resilience

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among patients with chronic diseases. The meta-analysis demonstrated that resilience-focused psychological programs, including cognitive behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and mindfulness practices, significantly improved resilience outcomes in patients (Janitra et al., 2024). This finding is promising, as it suggests that resilience is not an immutable trait but can be developed with appropriate support.

Resilience is defined as the capacity to manage stress, recover from adversity, and maintain optimal performance under challenging conditions (Robertson et al., 2015). In the context of healthcare professionals, this may involve remaining composed under pressure, effectively coping with emotional experiences, and managing emergencies. However, resilience is not an attribute that individuals can cultivate in isolation. Empirical evidence indicates that it is significantly influenced by team dynamics, the presence of supportive leadership, workload intensity, and the availability of resources (Gonçalves et al., 2022). In essence, resilience requires external support and does not develop spontaneously.

Failure to support healthcare workers in maintaining resilience can lead to burnout, a syndrome associated with work-related stress resulting from prolonged exposure to emotional and interpersonal job stressors. Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Salvagioni et al., 2017). It manifests as fatigue, emotional detachment from patients, and an increased likelihood of errors. When healthcare professionals experience burnout, they may feel hopeless, lose job satisfaction, or even contemplate leaving the profession. This not only impacts their well-being but also compromises the quality of patient care. Institutions that neglect the well-being of their staff may encounter increased staff shortages and a decline in the quality of care provided (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Incorporating resilience into the operational framework of healthcare systems is imperative. This entails providing healthcare professionals with access to stress management training, mental health support, and group discussions that facilitate reflection and rejuvenation (West et al., 2016). Additionally, it involves fostering safe and respectful teams where open communication and mutual support are encouraged, particularly in high-stress

environments where effective teamwork can significantly impact outcomes (Edmondson, 1999). Organizations play a pivotal role by advocating for equitable workloads, acknowledging staff contributions, and promoting work-life balance through policies and leadership that genuinely prioritize staff well-being (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017).

Healthcare professionals play a crucial role in society, and their contributions are both recognized and valued. It is important to acknowledge that seeking assistance when overwhelmed is a prudent decision, not a sign of weakness. Healthcare professionals should not face challenges in isolation. The emotional resilience required to perform their duties daily should be acknowledged, and efforts should be made to cultivate more supportive and compassionate work environments that enable healthcare professionals to thrive rather than merely endure. Resilience extends beyond mere toughness; it involves establishing systems that promote well-being. Healthcare settings must provide support, effective leadership, and empathy to truly care for those who care for others. Empirical evidence indicates that resilience can be developed, but the impetus for action must originate from all levels within the healthcare sector. Implementing structured, evidence-based strategies to support both providers and patients is essential for safeguarding healthcare systems from within. The current moment calls for decisive action. Healthcare workers merit more than mere commendation; they deserve substantive changes that safeguard their well-being.

Declaration of Interest

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