



# FACULTY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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## Signs of Distress: What We're Learning About Behavior and Substance Abuse Problems

A star med student, a promising young resident, or a brilliant colleague down the hall—any of these may be susceptible to some type of distress that can jeopardize their working relationships or even their careers.

Are individuals in the medical profession more likely than others to get into substance abuse trouble or behave in a disruptive way? And if so, what have behavior specialists learned about the causes?

Toby Haslam-Hopwood, Psy.D. offers observations from his own experience as director of professional assessments for the Professionals in Crisis program at The Menninger Clinic in Houston. Physicians account for about one-third of the patients who enter the inpatient program each year.

“When we look at the typical profile of a physician, we often see someone who’s self reliant, driven, focused on perfection and somewhat compulsive,” says Dr. Haslam-Hopwood. “These are wonderful personality characteristics in a physician—we want a doctor to be a perfectionist and compulsive about patient care. But when the traits

that make a good physician become exaggerated, they can lead to significant difficulties. A highly self-reliant individual often feels invincible, and may think, ‘I should be better than that.’ They are reluctant to access

“Prescription substance abuse is a problem related not only to doctors having the opportunity to self-medicate, but also to their predilection of not reaching out to others for help and support, formal or infor-



available resources when they encounter difficulties.”

Accurate statistics about substance abuse by medical professionals are scarce, because the problem involves deception and disguise. “A commonly accepted statistic is that substance abuse occurs in 10 to 15 percent of the general population,” says Dr. Haslam-Hopwood. “The rate in physicians is likely to be slightly higher than it is in the general population.”

mal,” notes Dr. Haslam-Hopwood.

Statistics on alcohol abuse in the profession are more readily available. “Over the course of medical school, 11 percent of med students will have at least a six-month period of excessive alcohol use,” says Dr. Haslam-Hopwood. “We see slightly higher numbers during residency and in practicing physicians.”

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## Signs of Distress: What We're Learning

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“Self care is rarely included as part of our overall professional training, and in some ways, self-neglect and sacrifice are valued and rewarded. To really to improve overall patient care, the medical system should adapt to support and encourage self care.”

*Toby Haslam-Hopwood, PsyD,  
The Menninger Clinic*

Disruptive behavior in the workplace is a more recently recognized problem, Dr. Haslam-Hopwood says. “In the past, disruptive behavior was somewhat tolerated, and in some ways expected in particular individuals—we tended to let the most brilliant individuals get away with bad behavior. But the workplace has changed dramatically in the last 15 to 20 years in terms of employee rights, expecta-

tions of behaviors, patient expectations and patient rights. Medical schools have an expectation to address concerns related to professional conduct in both the educational curriculum and their faculty.”

The American College of Physician Executives recently surveyed its members about incidents of disruptive behavior. Twenty-four percent reported at least several incidents of disruptive be-

havior among professional staff, and 70 percent reported that these incidents were related to the same physicians time after time.

“These are important issues to address, because difficult behavior affects staff morale, interdisciplinary communication, and ultimately quality of care,” says Dr. Haslam-Hopwood. “The worst thing a professional can do when a colleague exhibits signs of substance abuse or behavior

## Early Warning Signs of Physician Stress and Problems

### Internal Early Warning Signs

*(symptoms YOU may begin to notice)*

- Anxiety
- Irritability/angry outbursts
- Blaming and demanding of others
- “Someday/if only” fantasies
- Anger directed toward yourself
- Feeling guilty when taking time off
- Professional disillusionment/cynicism
- Sleep disturbance
- Emotional/physical exhaustion
- Cognitive inefficiency

- Feelings of helplessness/loss of control
- Inability to take on additional tasks

### External Early Warning Signs

*(symptoms OTHERS may begin to notice)*

- Isolation
- Mood swings
- Trouble meeting deadlines
- Impaired reasoning
- Illogical rationalizations
- Signs of substance use impairment
- Compromised coordination
- Overt physical changes
- Disruptive behavior

- Difficult to reach when on call
- Role confusion and inappropriate transformations of work relationships in the direction of “private behavior”
- Failure to remain focused on the primary work task of diagnosing and treating patients

*Source: “Recognizing the Early Warning Signs of Physician Stress and Potential Problems” for Kansas Medical Education Foundation, Scott C. Stacy, PsyD and Peter Graham, PhD, 2005 (used with permission)*



### Your Faculty Assistance Program: A Caring, Confidential Resource

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## Do You Brighten the Room When You Enter? Or When You Leave?

“Attitude is everything in any workplace,” says Richard Atkins, Ed.D., CEO of Improving Communications, a New York-based communication skills training firm whose clients include Scholastic Inc., Hilton Hotels and Con Edison.

Developing rapport with others is one effective way to create a more positive work environment, says Atkins.

“Find commonality. If you see a photo of someone’s fishing trip on their office wall, ask what they caught. Ask about their kids. ‘Did Jeff finally get his braces off?’”

Specific praise is another positive communication technique. Instead of telling a staff member, ‘nice job,’ say ‘I appreciate how carefully you prepared this report.’ Now they

know what nice means, and they’ll work harder to earn that praise again.”

### Resources

[www.improvingcommunications.com](http://www.improvingcommunications.com)

*Attitude is Everything: 10 Life-Changing Steps to Turning Attitude Into Action*, Keith Harrell (HarperCollins Publishers Inc., New York, 2000)

*Get Out of Your Own Way at Work...and Help Others Do the Same*, Mark Goulston, M.D. (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 2005)