



Case Stem and Questions Facilitator Guide

Burnout, Depression and Substance Use Disorder

Authored By: Stephanie Black, MD, EdM

Case scenario:

Judy is a recent graduate from a fellowship in pediatric anesthesiology and started her job as an attending four months ago in a city and academic hospital system that are both new to her, far from her hometown. She had been looking forward to becoming an attending, hoping that her schedule and stress level would lighten from intense years of residency and fellowship training, but has been feeling overwhelmed. She has struggled to learn the ins and outs of her new practice environment and colleagues, and with her new supervisory role. She recently had some clinical acuity that she felt unequipped to manage.

The long hours away from her partner and young child have created tension in her relationship, and she and her spouse recently argued about her “spending it all at work and having nothing left for home.” She used to love to cook, but now it feels like a chore. She feels guilty about not being available to them more, and she and her spouse have constant tension about expectations at home. She hasn’t had much time to make new friends. Despite having been a college athlete, she now rarely has time to exercise, something that always relieved her stress in residency. Often her daughter is in bed by the time she gets home, so Judy pours a glass of wine to unwind when she sits down for the first time all day, sometimes falling asleep on the sofa after a glass or two. Despite being exhausted, she hasn’t slept through the night for weeks, waking in the wee hours with racing thoughts.

Last week she discovered that she failed her subspecialty boards, the first time she’s ever struggled with an exam, and recently started questioning her decision to become a physician. She feels conflicted about where her time and energy go, and last week she cut off a conversation with a patient’s family abruptly during a sensitive conversation about their child’s care so she could leave in time to pick her daughter up from daycare, which garnered a patient complaint to her chief.

For the first time she’s feeling unsuccessful in multiple life domains and is struggling to imagine how to turn it around.

Discussion questions:

Is Judy burned out? If so, how? What is burnout?

What risk factors are present for burnout for Judy?

What are some primary drivers of physician burnout?

What are the “costs” of physician burnout?

What are some effective strategies to mitigate/address physician burnout?

From your self-assessments/pre-work:

- **Having done the self-assessments from the prework, how do you fare in terms of burnout?**
- **From the table you completed, what are some of the drivers of burnout in your workplace?**
- **From your own reflection, what factors might protect you against burnout?**

What is the relationship between burnout, mental health and substance use disorders?

How does substance use differ from substance abuse? From addiction?

Prevalence of substance use disorder (SUD) is significantly higher in anesthesiology than the general population. You very likely have encountered or been personally affected by SUD and/or addiction. Do you have a story you would like to share?

What features of anesthesiologists and our practice contributes to our increased rates of substance use disorder?

How does substance use disorder present in anesthesiologists?

If you suspect substance use disorder in a colleague, what should you do?

What are the priorities for addressing substance use disorder in a physician?

When you leave this room today, what can you do to protect yourself from burnout and SUD?