

# THE FOUR HORSEMEN of the PHYSICIAN-BURNOUT APOCALYPSE

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Our medical education indoctrinates us. Yes, indeed. While in training, we are expected to adopt attitudes and behaviors that become subconscious and automatic by the time we are board certified. To most doctors, these behavior patterns are invisible and unrecognized. However, if they continue to sit in your blind spot, they virtually guarantee physician burnout in your forties and fifties.

Here are the four horsemen of the physician-burnout apocalypse in all their glory. See if they feel familiar to you:

- 1 **Workaholic**
- 2 **Superhero**
- 3 **Emotion Free**
- 4 **Lone Ranger**

Burnout results when these four horsemen become “overused strengths.”

Basic training in the military lasts eight weeks. In that time, an 18-year-old can be conditioned to take a bullet on command.

Medical education lasts a minimum of seven years. Take a second to count up the time between your first day in medical school to your first day in private practice. I believe there is no conditioning program on the planet more thorough than the one that leads to becoming a practicing doctor.

If your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

That is the problem. Not everything in a doctor's world is a nail—especially after you graduate to private practice and the rest of your life. Burnout results when these four horsemen become “overused strengths.”

Being a workaholic / superhero / emotion-free / lone ranger is an absolute requirement to making it through a 72-hour shift in your residency, but it is not a great way to:

- Be in a loving relationship
- Raise your kids
- Get your own needs met
- Live your life



## THE PHYSICIAN WELL-BEING INDEX

### The online, interactive tool helping both individuals and their organizations assess and promote well-being

Leading researchers on physician burnout and well-being have developed an anonymous, interactive self-assessment tool for organizational use. Created by and launched for internal use at Mayo Clinic earlier this year, the online tool provides feedback on how a physician's well-being compares to physicians nationally, plus it tracks an organization's internal trends over time. For physician users, the tool can be customized to provide local resources for support and the ability to track their own well-being.

"We designed this tool to create a reliable method of calibration that would provide helpful feedback for individual physicians and an anonymous overview of physician wellness for their organizations. In a national study involving over 1,000 physicians, use of this tool stimulated physicians to pursue behavioral changes to improve personal well-being," says Dr. Lotte Dyrbye, a provider at the Mayo Clinic and co-developer of the Index. The original abstract can be found at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/m/pubmed/23979287](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/m/pubmed/23979287).

Since its launch, several groups outside the Mayo Clinic have begun the process of licensing and implementing the tool at their own organizations. Pricing varies based on the size of the group.\*

#### LEARN MORE



[www.mededwebs.com/what-we-do#section-well-being-index](http://www.mededwebs.com/what-we-do#section-well-being-index)

\* Mayo Clinic and Dr. Lotte Dyrbye have a financial interest in the technology referenced in this article. Revenue Mayo receives is used to support its not-for-profit mission.


> When you micromanage, can't let things go, and drive yourself and everyone around you crazy by having to do everything yourself, that is just your Lone Ranger programming. Yes, you are ultimately responsible for the outcomes in your practice (and your life), but you can ask for support. You can delegate and create systems that will take away some of your burden while delivering the quality you demand. It is possible.

For most of us, these four horsemen and their automatic behaviors are deeply subconscious. Remember that you spent a minimum of seven years installing them in your psyche—deliberately, consciously, and through thousands of hours of dedicated study and on-the-job training. No wonder they poke their heads into all areas of your life—and not always in a good way.

#### NEXT STEPS

Here's a simple way to expose your own brainwashing and lower your physician burnout risk.

Whenever you find an area of your practice or life that is not working the way you would like, ask yourself: "How am I perhaps acting like a workaholic / superhero / emotion-free / lone ranger here?"

When you notice one of the four horsemen as the source of your automatic behavior in this area, ask, "What might I do differently that will get me more of what I really want?" The power is yours. By being aware of the four horsemen of the physician-burnout apocalypse and making appropriate changes, you can achieve greater health and success in your life and medical career. 

I help my clients see this conditioning when it appears as automatic behavior that is driving their physician burnout; when they are using this set of hammers to drive things that are not nails.

#### A FEW EXAMPLES:

> When your only response to a challenge or "problem" in your practice is to work harder, that stems from your workaholic programming. I can assure you there are other ways to address almost any practice issue that do not involve you personally working harder.

> When you feel as if every challenge for your patients, your staff, your family, and yourself sits on your shoulders and you should be able to solve them all, that is your Superhero programming. The truth is, you are human. You are not a god. Learn to say, "I don't know the answer to that," or "I wish I could help here; I wonder what you will decide to do?" and let things go that are outside your control. Breathe.

> When you have strong feelings of fear, sadness, anguish, helplessness, love, joy, compassion, empathy... don't stuff them according to your emotion-free programming. And please don't feel guilty for having those feelings in the first place. You are human; you will have feelings. They are part of what makes life rich, juicy, and worth living. Let them flow. Don't bottle them up. And never be afraid to tell someone—especially your work team—what you are feeling in the moment. It lets them know you are not superhuman.