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## **Coping & Recovery after a Medical Error**

As a clinician, being involved in an event that harmed a patient may cause significant emotional distress and feelings of vulnerability. Although we may know that most adverse events involve systems errors not personal shortcomings, there is an appropriate sense of personal responsibility that we should and do feel after a patient is harmed.

Being involved in an error may cause us to question our competence and commitment to the practice of medicine. Long term impacts may include crisis of confidence, negative effects on interpersonal relationships, depression, and burnout. A professional culture of blame and silence can be further isolating. In addition, potential malpractice litigation can exacerbate the emotional impact.

A 2007 study through the Washington University School of Medicine surveyed 3,171 physicians after an adverse event. 61% experienced increased anxiety about future errors, 44% experienced a loss of confidence, 42% experienced sleeping difficulties and reduced job satisfaction, and 13% felt the event harmed their reputation (Waterman, 2007).

### **Reactions may include:**

- Behavioral: sleep disturbance, inability to get things done
- Emotional: anxiety, fear, anger, moodiness, feeling desperate, decreased self worth, feeling out of control
- Cognitive: indecisive, confused, inability to concentrate, obsessive rumination about the event
- Physical symptoms: fatigue, backaches, nausea

### **Positive coping strategies include:**

- Re-playing thoughts about the event is normal and will likely decrease over time. You may find it helpful to gently bring your attention back to something like your breathing or other calming thoughts.
- Understand the systems issues that contributed to the mistake and advocate for changes.
- Reflect on what has worked for you in the past during times of emotional stress.
- Share your feelings with family/friends.
- Try to rest more and eat well-balanced and regular meals (even when you don't feel like it).
- Exercise.
- Reestablish a normal schedule as soon as possible.

### **BWH Peer Support Program**

Many clinicians find that talking to another clinician who has “been there” is incredibly helpful. We have trained peer support colleagues in multiple departments, one of whom will reach out to you if you are involved in a medical error. Peer support is private and confidential. If you haven't heard from a peer supporter, please contact us via the contact information above.

### **Additional Resources**

While a traumatic incident cannot be erased from your memory, most people find that memories become less upsetting and vivid over time. If the feelings are prolonged or you are finding your normal routine difficult to manage, please let us know so we can connect you with someone to help. Get the help you need for clinical coverage, emotional support, and legal advice. Don't hesitate to contact Risk Management (617-732-6442), the Employee Assistance Program (<http://eap.partners.org>), or any of the resources listed on our website: [www.brighamandwomens.org/cpps](http://www.brighamandwomens.org/cpps).

You are not alone, so please don't hesitate to reach out.