



From Clinic to C-Suite™

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## **Balancing the co-morbidities of physician leadership fatigue**

Danielle Lord, PhD ©

HelixMD a leadership division of Archetype Learning Solutions

## **Executive Summary**

Physician leadership fatigue is not a personal failing, it is a systemic condition with identifiable, treatable co-morbidities.

Drawing on a decade of qualitative research with 33 physician leaders and current evidence on burnout, moral injury, and professional identity, HelixMD introduces a clinically intuitive framework that names three interconnected drivers of leadership fatigue:

1. Lack of meaningful leadership development
2. Laissez-faire or absent organizational support
3. Loss or erosion of professional identity

Rather than another "resilience" program, HelixMD offers an integrated system of assessment, structured recovery work, targeted leadership development, and dedicated physician coaching, all designed to treat the root causes, not just the symptoms.

This white paper outlines the evidence, the framework, and how HelixMD transforms the way physicians experience leadership.

## **The Crisis: Why Physician Leadership matters, and why it's failing**

### **The System is Losing Physician Leaders**

Healthcare's increasing complexity demands that physician's step into leadership roles, yet most are profoundly ill-prepared for the transition. Research demonstrates that:

- Most physician leaders report little or no formal leadership development despite jumping from clinical practice directly into executive roles.
- Leadership fatigue emerges rapidly, driven by vague roles, mounting administrative demands, and misalignment between physician values and institutional priorities.
- Burnout is not individual weakness, it is organizational failure: Cumulative Workplace Distress (CWD), a cluster of burnout, moral injury, and emotional strain, stems from systemic gaps, not personal resilience deficits.
- Physician leaders are leaving, taking their clinical expertise and institutional knowledge with them. Turnover costs health systems millions and fractures continuity of care.

## The Hidden Toll

Behind closed doors, physician leaders describe experiences that sound less like "leadership opportunity" and more like systemic injury or cumulative workplace distress:



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I feel like I'm straddling two worlds and I belong fully to neither. I've lost my clinical family and I am not trusted in the executive suite. I'm exhausted, confused, and wondering if I made a terrible mistake

Lord, Kodama, & Granzotti, 2025

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This is not burnout from working too hard. This is leadership fatigue, a distinct syndrome rooted in:

- Identity disruption and loss of professional belonging
- Moral dissonance between personal values and institutional demands
- Chronic role ambiguity and unsupportive cultures
- Isolation from both clinical and executive peers

### The research foundation: understanding leadership fatigue

#### What the evidence shows

Over ten years, two qualitative research studies examined the lived experiences of 33 physician leaders transitioning from clinician to executive roles. Participants spanned multiple specialties, leadership levels (i.e., CMO, director), and healthcare settings. Using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and rigorous narrative coding, researchers identified a constellation of shared, and preventable, stressors.

## **Key Findings:**

### 1. The Clinician-to-Leader transition is traumatic and poorly supported

Medical training reinforces expertise, independence, and clinical mastery, qualities that do not translate directly to modern, collaborative leadership. Physician leaders report:

- Little or no formal leadership development
- Ambiguous roles and shifting expectations
- Isolation from clinical and executive peer support
- Identity conflict as they leave the bedside

### 2. Leadership Fatigue stems from systemic gaps, not personal weakness

Cumulative Workplace Distress emerges from:

- Vague roles and conflicting demands
- Chronic lack of structured support and mentoring
- Misalignment between physician values and organizational priorities
- Hidden curricula and rigid hierarchies that suppress help-seeking

Critically: When social support, structured mentoring, and executive-level development programs were present, reported fatigue decreased significantly.

### 3. Organizational Culture is the Root, individual resilience is *not the solution*

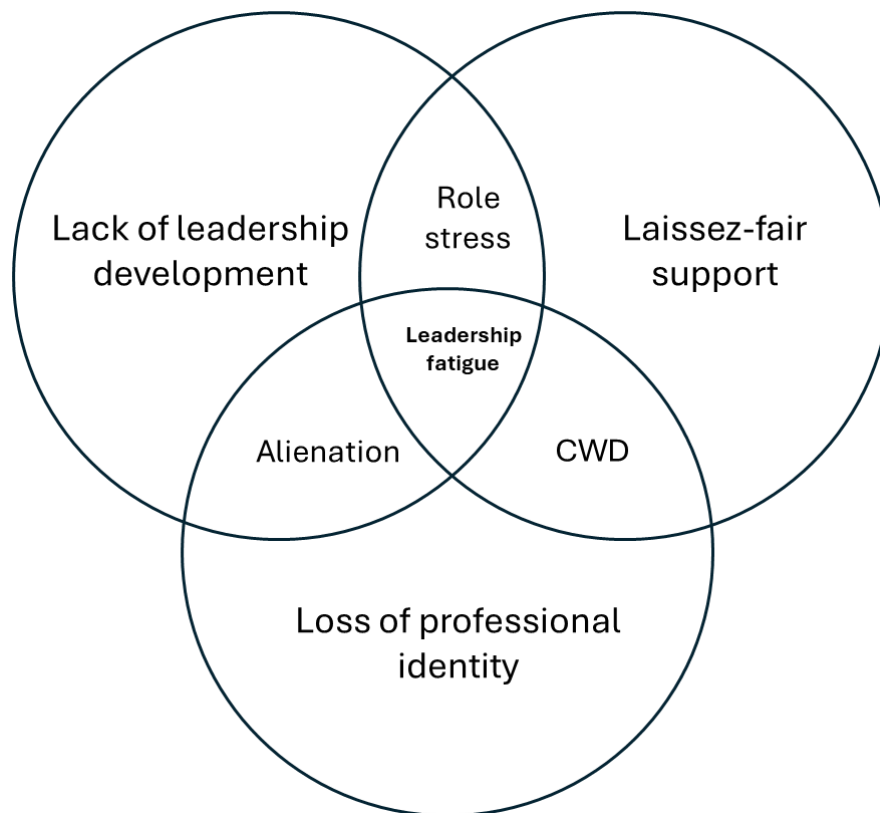
Most physician wellness interventions target symptoms: mindfulness, exercise, sleep hygiene. Yet the research shows that burnout is a downstream product of role stress, culture, and systemic design.

Physician leaders thrive when:

- Roles are clearly defined and realistic
- Peer mentoring and executive sponsorship are structured and ongoing
- Psychological safety permits dissenting voices and help-seeking
- Clinical or collegial connection pathways prevent social isolation

## The Co-Morbidities framework: naming what's really happening

Just as clinicians diagnose co-morbidities alongside a primary condition, physician leadership fatigue rarely stands alone. Research reveals three interconnected, treatable co-morbidities that drive the majority of leadership distress:



### Co-Morbidity 1: Lack of meaningful Leadership Development

What it looks like:

Physicians are promoted for clinical excellence, not leadership readiness. They inherited roles that demand soft skills (emotional intelligence, influence, conflict navigation), strategic thinking, and executive fluency, none of which were part of medical training or residency. While many physicians know what leadership looks and feels like, execution is a very different thing, especially when clinical autonomy over specific situations and events.

The symptoms:

- Constant self-doubt: "Am I doing this right?"
- Reactive decision-making in ambiguous situations
- Difficulty building trust and influence
- Exhaustion from "figuring it out alone"

The treatment:

Structured, longitudinal leadership development that bridges clinical thinking to executive strategy, balances hard skills (finance, operations) with emotional intelligence, and is delivered by people who understand physician culture.

### **Co-Morbidity 2: Laissez-Faire or absent organizational support**

What it looks like:

Leadership is invisible or hands-off. Physician leaders are given a role and left to navigate alone. Feedback is rare. Mentoring is accidental rather than intentional. There is no peer cohort, no executive sponsor, no structured role integration.

The symptoms:

- Moral dissonance: "I'm asked to act against my values with no one to talk to about it."
- Isolation: "I'm the only one who understands this burden."
- Ineffectiveness: "I don't know what success looks like or how to get there."
- Rapid disillusionment and intent to leave

The treatment:

Deliberate, ongoing support, peer cohorts, executive mentoring, physician coaches who "speak physician," to help leaders feel seen, valued, and connected.

### **Co-Morbidity 3: Loss or erosion of Professional Identity**

What it looks like:

Physician leaders describe feeling caught between two worlds, no longer fully clinical, not yet fully accepted as executives. They've lost the daily connection to patient care that anchored their identity. They're asked to prioritize business metrics over patient focus. They navigate organizational politics that feel at odds with medicine's core values.

The symptoms:

- Identity confusion: "Who am I now?"
- Moral injury: "This isn't why I became a doctor."

- Authenticity loss: "I'm performing a role, not being myself."
- Rapid burnout and attrition
- Distressed, not disruptive

The treatment:

Intentional pathways to reconnect with clinical meaning, physician-specific leadership frameworks, and ongoing work to honor the physician identity while building executive competence.

## **HelixMD: An integrated response**

HelixMD is designed specifically for physician leaders navigating these three co-morbidities. It is not another self-help tool or "resilience" app. It is a comprehensive system that treats the root causes of leadership fatigue while supporting ongoing professional growth.

### **Core Components**

#### **1. Teas-Based Assessment**

A proprietary assessment reveals how leadership fatigue shows up in your unique pattern, whether it manifests as over-functioning, withdrawal, emotional dysregulation, or other physician-specific presentations. Rather than labeling, it describes your current state and identifies which co-morbidities are most active for you.

Why it matters: You understand burnout; you understand diagnostic patterns. This assessment speaks your language and creates a foundation for targeted support. You can find the assessment in the *Diagnosing the co-morbidities of Physician Leadership Fatigue quick-start guide*.

#### **2. Targeted Leadership Development – supports Co-morbidity Lack of Development**

Cohort-based, longitudinal training designed by physicians for physicians, with case studies brining real issues to life. Topics include:

- Bridging clinical to executive thinking
- Leading through ambiguity and change
- Emotional intelligence and authentic influence
- Building psychological safety and dissenting voices
- Finance, operations, and strategic thinking (without losing your soul)
- Navigating moral dissonance and organizational politics

Why it matters: This is not generic leadership training. Every module acknowledges your clinical training, honors physician values, and builds skills that actually reduce fatigue.

### **3. Dedicated Physician Coaches – supports co-morbidity Laissez-faire Support**

One-on-one coaching with someone who gets it, a physician or physician-trained coach who understands the unique transition from clinic to C-suite. Coaching focuses on:

- Real-time problem-solving in your specific context
- Processing moral injury and identity loss
- Building confidence and executive presence
- Creating peer connection and reducing isolation

Why it matters: Coaching is not therapy, but it is deeply human. Knowing that someone has been where you are, and has found a way through, changes everything.

### **4. Physician Personal Recovery Workbook – supports co-morbidity Loss of Identity**

A structured, self-directed workbook grounded in your co-morbidities framework. It guides you through:

- Naming what's happening (which co-morbidities are active in your life?)
- Understanding the systemic roots (this is not your fault)
- Reconnecting with your professional identity and values
- Identifying concrete, actionable next steps
- Building a sustainable path forward

Why it matters: This is not cheerleading or platitudes. It is clinical, rigorous, and rooted in the real experiences of 33 physician leaders who've walked this path.

### **How It Works Together**

Your HelixMD journey might look like this:

1. Start with the assessment to understand your current pattern and which co-morbidities are most active.
2. Identify you're your one, two, or three co-morbidities, then use the following tools to help you reclaim your physician DNA.
  - a. Lack of development: Join a Leadership Development cohort with peers navigating similar challenges, reducing isolation, building skills, and creating lasting peer support.
  - b. Laissez-faire support: Engage the Personal Recovery Workbook to explore the systemic roots and reconnect with your identity and values.



- c. Loss of identity: Work with a physician coach to translate insights into action, process the emotional weight of leadership, and navigate your specific organizational context.

Throughout, HelixMD affirms a core truth: Your leadership fatigue is not a personal failure. It is a systemic condition with identifiable, treatable causes. And you are not alone.

## **The Evidence Base: Why This Works**

### **Research on Physician Leadership Development**

Recent studies confirm that physician leadership fatigue responds to exactly what HelixMD provides:

- Structured mentoring and peer support reduce burnout significantly. Physicians need peer cohort connection, both to normalize the experience and to build sustainable support networks.
- Longitudinal, tailored leadership development is more effective than one-off workshops. We address real leadership issues facing physician leaders, going beyond the business of healthcare. The transition from clinician to leader is not a weekend course; it is an 18–24 month process that requires ongoing, context-specific support.
- Coaching and psychological safety reduce moral injury. When leaders have a trusted person to process dilemmas with, and when their organizations permit authentic dissent, both burnout and intent to leave decrease.
- Reconnecting with professional identity and meaning is protective against burnout. Interventions that help physicians honor their clinical identity while building executive skills reduce emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

### **Why Current Approaches Fall Short**

Most physician wellness programs focus on individual symptoms, such as, stress management, sleep, exercise, mindfulness. While valuable, they miss the systemic drivers:

- Role ambiguity that creates chronic uncertainty
- Absent or ineffective leadership structures that leave physicians isolated
- Organizational cultures that punish authenticity and dissent
- Systemic misalignment between physician values and institutional priorities

HelixMD acknowledges what the research shows: The problem is not that physicians lack resilience. The problem is that systems are not designed for physician leader success.

## **For physicians: Why HelixMD Is different**

You deserve clarity about what you're stepping into and tools to navigate it successfully. HelixMD helps you:

- Understand the transition before you're overwhelmed
- Build skills grounded in physician values and clinical thinking
- Connect with peers who "get it"
- Know you have ongoing support, not just a handbook and a prayer



Where support is absent, the emotional weight compounds:  
Role confusion – identity conflict – isolation – moral injury – exhaustion  
It's a pattern so predictable; we built HelixMD to disrupt it.

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Danielle Lord, PhD (2025)

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## **If you're already in a leadership role and challenged**

You're not broken. Your system is broken. HelixMD helps you:

- Name what's happening through the lens of co-morbidities
- Understand that this is a systemic issue, not personal weakness
- Reconnect with your professional identity and values
- Find practical pathways forward, with support
- Build or deepen peer connections that sustain you

## **If you're considering leaving**

If you're exploring an exit strategy, explore what HelixMD offers before you decide. Many physicians who felt ready to exit found that the right support, peer connection, and framework changed everything. You deserve the chance to lead authentically and sustainably.

## **For Health Systems: the Strategic Imperative**

Physician leaders drive organizational strategy, culture, and clinical quality. Yet most health systems invest more in equipment than in physician leader development and support.

The business case is clear:

- Physician leader turnover costs \$500K–\$1M+ per departure (recruitment, training, lost productivity).
- Toxic leadership culture increases clinician burnout and drives attrition across the organization.
- Physician leaders who feel supported and developed are more effective, innovative, and engaged, and less likely to leave.

HelixMD offers health systems:

- A proven framework for developing and retaining physician leaders
- Reduced burnout, moral injury, and turnover among physician executives
- Stronger leadership cultures built on psychological safety and authentic influence
- Measurable improvement in leadership effectiveness and team engagement

## **Getting started with HelixMD**

### **For individual physicians**

1. Take the Teas Assessment to understand your current pattern and which co-morbidities are most active.
2. Explore your Personal Recovery Workbook to deepen self-understanding and identify your next steps.
3. Join a Leadership Development cohort to build skills, peer connection, and sustainable support.
4. Consider physician coaching for ongoing, personalized guidance as you navigate your leadership journey.

### **For Health Systems and Leadership Teams**

1. Assess your current physician leader support landscape. Are roles clear? Is mentoring structured? Do leaders feel isolated or supported?
2. Explore a pilot program with a cohort of emerging or struggling physician leaders.

3. Measure outcomes: reduction in burnout, improvement in leadership effectiveness, intent to stay, and peer connection.
4. Scale what works to build a culture where physician leaders thrive.

### **Conclusion: A Different Path Forward**

Physician leadership fatigue is real, widespread, and costly, to individuals, to teams, and to organizations. Yet it is also preventable and treatable when we shift from blaming individual resilience to redesigning systems.

HelixMD represents this shift. It is grounded in a decade of rigorous research with physician leaders. It acknowledges the systemic roots of leadership fatigue through the co-morbidities framework. And it offers an integrated, evidence-based pathway, assessment, recovery work, development, coaching, and peer support, to help you lead authentically, sustainably, and effectively.

You became a physician to help people and drive change. Leadership is an extension of that calling, not a betrayal of it. But it requires the right preparation, support, and framework.

HelixMD is here to help you lead in a way that honors your identity, your values, and your well-being. Reclaim what's in your DNA: Don't let leadership fatigue sideline the evolution of your career.

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## About HelixMD

HelixMD was created by physician leadership experts committed to transforming how physicians experience and thrive in leadership roles. Grounded in a decade of rigorous research with physician leaders and designed with physician coaches, HelixMD combines cutting-edge assessment, structured recovery and development work, and dedicated human support to help you lead authentically and sustainably.

For more information, visit [www.archetypelearningsolutions/helixmd.com](http://www.archetypelearningsolutions/helixmd.com) or contact us at [danielle@archetypelearningsolutions.com](mailto:danielle@archetypelearningsolutions.com) | 253-269-2116.

Leadership fatigue is treatable. You are not alone. Let's get started.