

DOCTOR, HEAL THYSELF

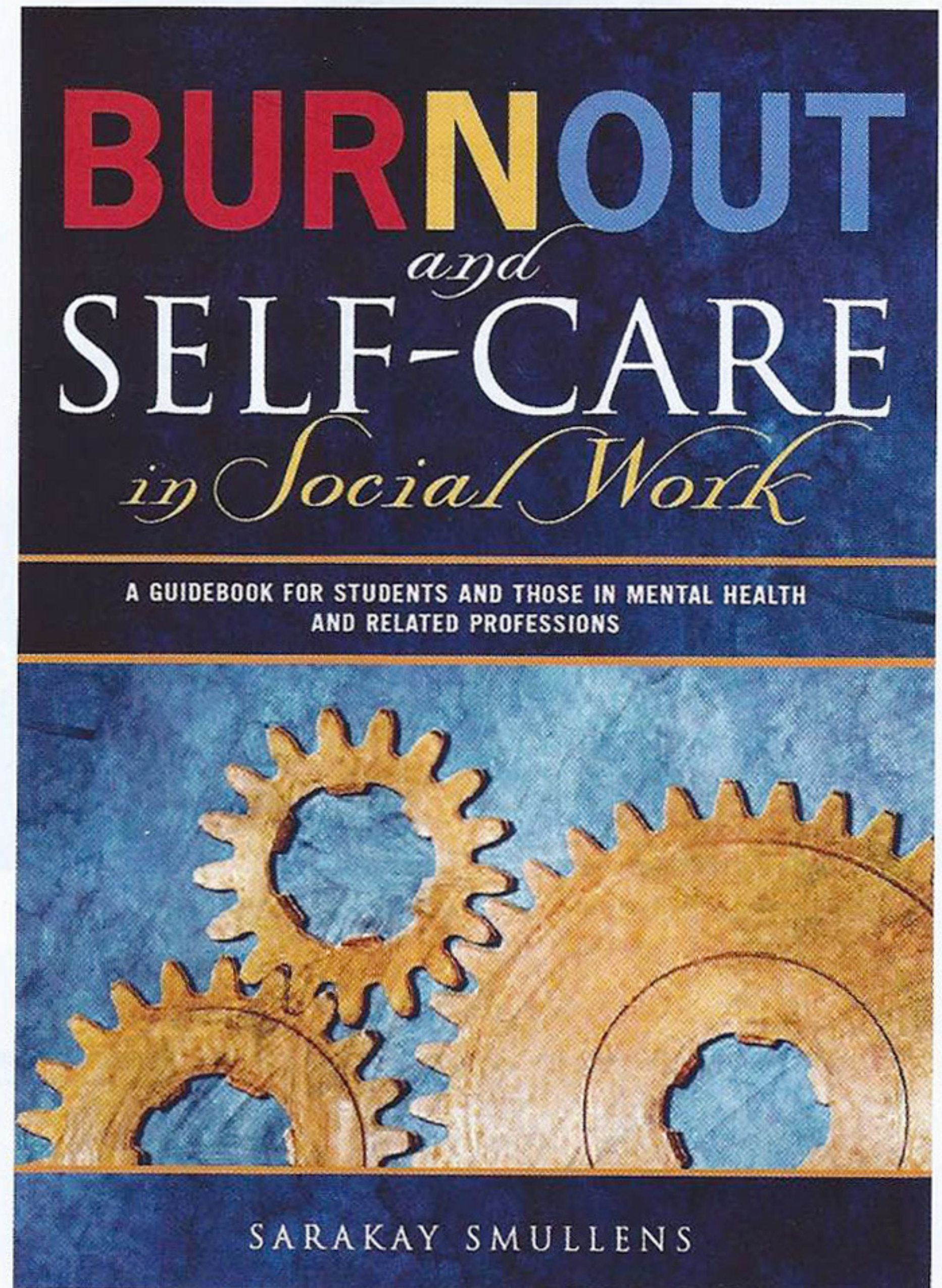
A NEW BOOK FROM SARAKAY SMULLENS OFFERS STRATEGIES PHYSICIANS AND OTHERS CAN USE TO COPE WITH STRESS AND AVOID BURNOUT.

Social worker and therapist SaraKay Smullens, MSW, LCSW, ACSW, BCD, CGP, CFLE, from Philadelphia, has seen burnout in action in the mental health field since returning to work in the 1970s as a therapist assisting the courts in domestic violence cases. “What I saw is that experienced and young social workers and mental health professionals were leaving a field they trained for and wanted to remain in,” she says. “They could not due to burnout.”

Since then, Smullens has become a recognized expert in diagnosing and treating burnout, writing about the topic in *The Huffington Post* and penning bestselling books on the topic. While her latest, *Burnout and Self-Care in Social Work*, addresses the concept of burnout in universal terms, Smullens has particular expertise in recognizing and diagnosing its effects among doctors, having been married to one for more than 30 years.

“No profession has burnout waiting in the wings to a greater extent than medicine,” she says. “I have been married to Stan for 36 years, and only those who share lives with doctors can realize the enormous and diverse pressures they face in our ever-changing, fast-paced, wired society, where doctors are expected to be available 24/7, despite pressures, responsibilities, and exhaustion.”

There are three major, omnipresent causes of burnout among doctors, she notes. First is vicarious trauma, when the doctor experiences a patient’s illness like his or her own. Next is countertransference, when one is exhausted dealing with



impossible demands, including financial issues and ruthless people. And finally, there’s compassion fatigue, when the person feels like they have nothing left to give.

The book offers multiple case studies of people who have faced burnout, and evidence-based strategies to alleviate and prevent it. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, Smullens says, so doctors must find the self-care strategies that work best for themselves and their situations. Self-care offers “the strength to claim the joys of living and endure what we must,” she writes. “And it will help us ensure that our [patients] are able, whenever possible, to do the same.” —*Ian P. Murphy*