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Professional self-care: Advice from colleagues

It's no surprise that more than 2 years into the pandemic, doctors, nurses, and other healthcare providers feel the weight of the world on their shoulders. COVID-19 has taken a hit on their mental health, and with new variants cropping up, there's little relief in sight. Coupled with the stress of an already tough job, clinicians have to find ways to take care of themselves so they can support their patients in the best way possible.

Ever wonder how your colleagues take care of themselves? In exclusive interviews with *MDLinx*, six medical professionals shared their strategies for self-care, which they believe make them better providers.

1. Connect with others

Social connection can be a great way to stay mentally healthy, especially in times of crisis. For healthcare professionals, this is especially important when working in such a high-stress environment.

A study published in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* showed that feeling connected to others and seeking the help of a mental health professional are ways to increase a person's sense of well-being.

How do social bonds help you to become a better provider during the pandemic?

Joanne Frederick, NCC, LPC-DC, VA, LCPC-MD: "The one wellness practice I engage in to be a better doctor is to stay socially connected. Living through a pandemic has caused this activity to be a little more difficult, but it is the one

activity that I enjoy the most and have had to come up with creative ways to engage in social connectedness.

“For example, I have planned and hosted [virtual] family reunions, I have served the community both virtually and in person through my sorority, and I have managed to spend quality time with friends, family, and loved ones in safe ways (wearing a mask). I realized that social distancing is important during these times, but I must continue to socialize, enjoy myself, live life, and stay connected to others.

“By doing so, it keeps me from feeling isolated and negative so that I can better serve my clients from a place of genuine contentment and positivity.”

Creating a bond with patients is vital, too. While virtual and/or socially distanced interactions are important in a social setting, meeting with patients face-to-face is critical to becoming a better provider. These interactions can strengthen patient trust and give clinicians a sense of pride in their work.

However, many medical professionals are burdened by having to spend long hours on documentation. Sometimes, technology can get in the way of a personal connection with patients.

What are some ways you have seen documentation programs hinder how healthcare providers can strive to be better?

John Guiliiana, DPM, MS: “In the clinical setting, I have found how we engage with our EHRs can have a profound effect on job satisfaction, productivity, and ultimately patient satisfaction.

“I frequently see physicians struggling to keep up with their documentation, allowing the EHR to disrupt face-to-face and meaningful interaction with their patients, and completing chart notes long after hours and on weekends.”

Dr. Guiliiana explained that a study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* showed that allowing other staff to interact directly with the EHR software can result in a lower physician documentation burden, a more efficient workflow, and improved patient-physician interaction and communication.

“The trend of medical scribes might not be feasible for all clinicians, but a team approach to documentation can significantly improve job satisfaction and quality of life,” he added.

2. Physical activity

While getting motivated to do any form of physical activity when you are stressed, depressed, or anxious may be challenging, it can keep those feelings at bay once you start. For medical professionals, exercising on a break during a long shift or stretching before starting your day can be a great and simple strategy to help you become a better provider.

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— *Haley Perlus, PhD*

How does physical exercise help you to become a better provider?

Haley Perlus, PhD, sports psychologist: “I am a big believer in pre-performance routines that get you physically, mentally, and emotionally energized. My most common practices include music, physical activity, and getting outside. Just 15 minutes of one or more of these three practices give me the energy to be my best self for others.

“I not only want to share my knowledge with the people I work with but also model a spirit of optimism and enthusiasm. When I show up with high positive energy, I know I give the individuals I work with the best opportunity to create the same high positive energy for themselves.”

What specific methods of physical activity do you choose to participate in to help you become a better provider?

Michael Horn, MD: “The wellness practice I engage in is triathlon. It helps me excel in focus and discipline, enhancing my performance and creativity at work.”

3. Get plenty of rest

Of all the strategies for becoming a better provider, rest is perhaps the most important. A recent systematic review of more than 40 studies found that the presence of fatigue and insufficient sleep can lead to adverse physician health outcomes.

How have you incorporated sleep into your strategy for becoming a better provider?

Bryanna Connor, MD, healthcare ambassador: “I admit that I have had more than one morning when I get up early to accomplish all that I need to do for the day, especially in the last 2 years, but I really love my sleep. It is underrated!

“Studies show that daytime cognitive function is much improved with proper, continuous, uninterrupted sleep. I always tell people that my only secret to getting through medical school was to take a power nap—I can set my alarm for 25 minutes and fall asleep and wake up and feel as though I have rested for so much longer. Power naps are awesome!

“Whether it's a power nap or a good nights' continuous rest, sleep is the most important factor for my own well-being as a doctor.”

Ultimately, the importance of sleep should not be understated. Getting adequate rest can help you become a better provider, allowing you to take care of your own mental and physical health.

Find your method of self care

Finding the method of self-care that works the best for you and your lifestyle is key to balancing becoming a better provider—no matter what it is.

What do you suggest for providers who struggle to find a method that works for them?

Anthony Kaveh, MD, anesthesiologist, integrated medicine specialist: "I strongly advocate for patients and doctors to tap into their incredible mind-body powers. The easiest practice is to integrate one self-care technique with every patient encounter. There's no one-size-fits-all. Every provider needs to discover what works for them. Self-discovery is part of the journey!"

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