

SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-CARE KEY TO EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

It has been nearly a year since Beyond Blue released results of a mental health survey conducted with 14,000 Australian doctors and medical students.¹ Compared to other health professionals and the general population, doctors and medical students reported higher rates of psychological distress, burnout, diagnosed mental illness, suicidal ideation and attempted suicide. Further, doctors who made use of predominantly negative coping strategies were more at risk of negative outcomes. This research provides indisputable evidence that the medical community should be concerned.

To improve the health status of doctors, changes must be made by both the medical community and individual practitioners. We need to develop a medical culture that honours and encourages self-awareness and self-care as a means of maintaining mental health and sustaining meaningful medical practice.

In recent years, the mental health of doctors has become a key issue, now widely recognised by most medical Faculties and Colleges. The RACP has incorporated a self-care module into its CPD program.² Within my field, the Australasian Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine has developed a “Trainee in Difficulty Pathways” guide for registrars requiring extra supervision. The Faculty also has a mentoring program and holds an annual national training weekend, with lectures emphasising the relevance and importance of self-care and stress management.³ If these promising developments prove successful, they could lead to self-care modules and constructive coping skills being included in medical degree teaching programs.

Self-awareness is integral to the meaningful and sustainable practice of medicine. Self-awareness involves being mindful of your thoughts and feelings, your coping mechanisms, your strengths and vulnerabilities, and most importantly the values that motivate your goals and actions. Mindfulness is fast being recognised as a form of evidence-based medicine applicable to many areas of health.⁴ Mindfulness simply means focusing on the present moment without passing judgement.⁵ Mindfulness meditation practice develops self-awareness, focus and attention. Daily mindfulness is exercise for the mind, just as walking is exercise for the body. Seeking professional help, journalling, self-reflective practice, yoga and reading are other useful ways of developing self-awareness.

Self-care is also vital to the meaningful and sustainable practice of medicine. Self-care involves looking after your needs, both on a daily basis and in times of crisis, to maintain emotional, psychological and physiological resilience and wellbeing. Each person has different needs, but for most, daily self-care means adopting a balanced lifestyle filled with value-driven activities: eating and sleeping well, exercising regularly and socialising, while moderating drug and alcohol intake. Developing a repertoire of restorative and empowering coping skills to use during crisis periods is the other essential component of self-care. These skills help to moderate less helpful and addictive coping mechanisms.⁶⁻⁸ Crisis skills include meditation, exercise, creative activities, recreation, talking with friends or other professionals, rest and cognitive skills. Scheduling in downtime after a hectic day and planning pleasurable activities can help to maintain our work capacity. Engaging in outdoor activities helps to soothe and ground us when we are emotionally overwhelmed. By being compassionate and honest with ourselves, we can find ways of coping that restore our emotional energy.



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Some say that medicine is an art form. I say that surviving medicine is an art form. However, with a little self-awareness and self-care, it is possible to sustain a meaningful and enjoyable practice.

The process of understanding yourself and your needs takes time and self-reflection. Acquiring skills to manage yourself through periods of stress without becoming distressed also takes practice and effort. Once these skills are mastered, medicine becomes less distressing and emotionally draining, and you can pass your knowledge and skills on to your patients and others around you. I look forward to the day when adaptive coping tools like mindfulness are taught at university and, in addition to Friday after-work drinks, JMO associations sponsor yoga and other relaxation pursuits.

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