

How to Practice Self-Care and Coping Skills for Clinicians

Reclaiming your Passion for Practice

By Barbara Wingate, MD

These are difficult times. Stress, burnout, compassion fatigue and moral injury were conditions experienced by clinicians at alarming rates even before the pandemic. Now with fears about exposure, constantly changing information and protocols, shifts in delivery of care, being burdened by heavy PPE, and faced with patient loss like never before, many have found themselves thinking about a change in career or early retirement.



It can leave us feeling powerless to reclaim joy with so many of the drivers of stress and burnout being issues we can do little about. I've found it helps to prioritize what you might be able to change, or improve, without overly focusing on what you cannot control. One of those areas is how you are treating your body, mind and spirit.

How can you reclaim some of your own passion for practice even within the changing and challenging landscape of medicine?

Main Rule: Take Care of Yourself

According to a survey conducted by [The Harris Poll](#), many physicians overlook their own self-care despite knowing that self-care is a vitally important part of health and overall well being. With all of the barriers to practicing self-care, you must commit yourself to the practice of self-care, or you will not sustain it. It requires discipline. I often hear clinicians say, "Well, we all know about the importance of self-care...we need different answers." That may be true but knowing about it and practicing it are two very different things.

Bring Lightness and Humor to Your Life and Practice

If you don't practice self-care you may feel a sense of heaviness, which certainly affects how you behave and how others experience you.

Without self-care you can lose your manners, your compassion, your curiosity and listening skills, and your important intuitive skills about patients or staff members—and what they need to succeed. Very importantly, you lose your sense of humor. You don't have to be a joker—but humor gives us a lightness that is contagious, healing and can help us cope with the pandemic.

I have had the pleasure of seeing the Dalai Lama in person more than once. He smiles, laughs, wears a baseball cap and giggles. That is lightness-of-being personified. Read Norman Cousins's classic 1989 book on healing himself: [Headfirst: the Biology of Hope](#). We, as physicians, and other healthcare workers, can learn much from his wisdom. He uses funny movies to lighten up! We need that, especially today. Do you have a few movies in your toolkit? I have several and Sandra Bullock and Betty White often have a role. What else makes you feel light? Family? Books? Your kids? Pets? Friends?

You may feel guilty considering lightness and fun when so many are suffering, but truly, lightness and humor will help you cope and allow you to stay at your best, and it's not an indulgence—it's a necessity.

Additional Coping Tips

Think about what you eat, how much sleep you get and your level of exercise and consider adding purposeful use of any form of meditation, spirituality or religious practice. For example, research related to physicians practicing meditation reveals the following findings:

- 1) Clinician participation in a mindful communication program was associated with short-term and sustained improvements in well being and attitudes associated with patient centered care.
- 2) Participating in an abbreviated mindfulness training course adapted for primary care clinicians was associated with reductions in indicators of job burnout, depression, anxiety and stress.
- 3) Mindful clinicians engage in more patient-centered communication and have more satisfied patients.

Use whatever coping method best works for you. Taking walks count, too!

Take a self-assessment to see what may have fallen by the wayside or what new things you can try. VITAL WorkLife's [Wheel of Well Being assessment is a useful tool for this](#). Additionally, external support from VITAL WorkLife can help you navigate this path. With your Peer Coaching resource, you can talk with a coach, like myself, to help you set up guidelines for finding much needed time for yourself and chart a pathway to well being.

National Doctor's Day is March 30th

National Doctor's Day—what a perfect opportunity to reflect on why you went into medicine and start to bring some joy, lightness and fun back into your practice.

Whether you are a physician, advanced practice provider, in your residency, fellowship or in medical school, this is a wonderful profession and if you are not experiencing it in that way, then please go back to the main rule and take care of yourself.

Behave like the loving caring doctor you always wanted to be and still want to be. What goes around comes around... I am unabashedly proud to be a doctor and if all I get is a few kind words of appreciation on March 30th—well that is fine. I am doing this work because I love it. In a time when so many are hurting, let's celebrate that you and I are able to be part of healing—and take pride and joy in it. Think of a way to compliment a colleague on National Doctor's Day—and every day.

We Can Help

As part of your VITAL WorkLife Well Being Resources, you have access to [peer coaching](#), face-to-face or virtual counseling and in-the-moment behavioral health support. You also have access to [WorkLife Concierge](#), which can help you with every day and special occasion tasks to help you make the most of your limited time.

Contact us at **877.731.3949** or through the [VITAL WorkLife App](#) to access your resources today.

Sources:

<https://info.vitalworklife.com/mindfulness-in-medicine-article-landing-page>