

Take a mindful approach to manage med school stress

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Medical students face a daunting workload that includes the pressures of the clinical environment. The resulting stresses can adversely impact academic performance and life satisfaction, among a number of other factors.

Mindfulness practices, such as yoga and meditation, are becoming an increasingly popular mechanism through which medical trainees harness their stress. While they take on various forms, the programs typically emphasize a focus on being present in the moment. Employing such techniques effectively requires training and self-discipline.

“With a mindfulness practice, it’s really simple in theory,” said Chloe Zimmerman, a post-graduate researcher who is helping to implement a mindfulness curriculum at Brown University’s Warren Alpert Medical School. “In general the goal is you focus your attention on the breath and the body. When your mind wanders, you bring it back. As soon as you try it, you realize it’s not simple at all.”

The benefits of mindfulness

Ronald Epstein, MD, is the author of “Attending: Medicine, Mindfulness, and Humanity.” He has been teaching a mindful practice course to third-year medical students at the University of Rochester Medical Center since 2007.

“We all have a need to know ourselves better and to understand our place in the world,” said. Dr. Epstein, a professor of family medicine, psychiatry and oncology and medicine at Rochester. “That’s the fundamental motivation for students to not only think of medical training as learning a set of facts and procedures but also paying attention to their evolving relationship to the work that they do. The meaning they derive from that work, and their connection to it.”

A recent study indicated that medical students who participate in mindfulness based stress reduction

programs see a decrease in anxiety and stress. Reduction in outside noise combined with the discipline to remain present in the moment can also lead to more effective concentration, Zimmerman believes.

“Medical students are being trained to have 100 things on their mind at all times,” she said. “It’s harder and harder to focus on one thing explicitly. [Mindfulness] gives you that skill to know that you can focus on everything at once, but when you need to focus on one thing, you can be present with it.”

Finding time to practice

As of 2014, mindfulness programs were offered at the majority of U.S. medical schools. A mindfulness practice, however, requires an outside commitment from the practitioner.

Therein lies one of the challenges. For medical students, taking even 15 minutes a day to meditate might not be possible. That doesn’t mean one can’t tailor a mindfulness practice to their schedule.

“Some people think of mindfulness as going off to a retreat and sitting in a lotus position for a period of time or sitting by a still pond, and all of that is very nice and useful, but the mindfulness that I try to emphasize with medical students and practitioners is being mindful in the moment while you’re actually doing your work,” Dr. Epstein said.

“I encourage people to find some way to find quiet time during busy and chaotic workdays. Even if it’s taking a second before you go in to see the next patient and you pause to take a breath and mentally set aside what’s just happened with the previous patient, I view that as a mindfulness practice. It’s a way of being aware of your own state of being and a way of regulating and modulating your attention, your emotion, your state of presence during your work life.”