

Love and learn: How to be a good partner during medical residency

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Training to be a physician, particularly during your medical residency, is a unique path. Compared with other careers, residency requires an unusual kind of commitment and flexibility. The same can be said of maintaining or starting a relationship as a resident.

So how can residents be good partners on top of everything else that is asked of them? This residency advice—a list of “love hacks”—can help answer that question.

Find other outlets

A large part of intimacy is sharing the ups and downs of life with your partner. For residents, the highs and lows are more dramatic than most. Identifying sounding boards outside of your relationship can put less strain on your home life. This is particularly true if your partner is not also a physician.

“It can be difficult for him to understand tough patient encounters or diagnoses,” said Amy Brown, MD, a third-year neurology resident at Loyola University Chicago. “It’s important for medical students or residents with non-physician partners to foster other relationships with either other medical colleagues or close friends who can help during these difficult times. Not that I exclude [her husband], but it’s just hard for him to fully grasp my experiences.”

Maintain empathy

Just as you are asked to understand where a patient is coming from in the clinic, you should understand and appreciate the everyday stresses that your partner may encounter and, when possible, pick up the slack.

For instance, Stephanie Lee, MD, is planning a wedding on the other side of the country in addition to training as a preventive medicine resident in South Carolina.

“It requires a lot of planning and I’m taking it on myself,” Dr. Lee said. “My fiancée is a medical student right now and he’s in an area where he is studying for Step 2 right now, and it’s very stressful. I’m trying to remember what it’s like to have that type of stress.”

Adapt to circumstances

Even if you are among the 40 percent of physicians who end up marrying a person working in health care, your circumstances might not be optimal during residency.

Taylor George, MD, is a second-year emergency medicine resident at the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Virginia. Her husband is also a physician, working 300 miles away in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. To make up for the distance, they do digital dates over a bottle of wine on Skype.

“My husband and I—because we live apart, because residency is tough—we decided to choose one topic that neither of us knew about,” Dr. George says. “When we are not at the hospital, we want to concentrate on that one thing that’s not work, so we chose learning about wine. The two of us are both working on a sommelier certification. When both of us have the night off but we can’t be together, we often buy the same bottle of wine in two different locations and taste it together.”