

# What medical students need to know about self-care

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Medical school is a formal introduction to the clinical skills of a physician and an informal one to the often enormous stresses the profession entails. Medical students would do well to adopt self-care behaviors to help them during their studies and that will serve their needs as physicians.

The AMA offers a wide range of insights on medical student well-being.

Research published in the journal *BMC Medical Education* gets right to the point in the title of an article examining when students take the initiative in protecting their wellbeing: “U.S. medical students who engage in self-care report less stress and higher quality of life.” Activities highlighted in the research involve nutrition, stress management, physical activity, health responsibility, interpersonal relations and spiritual growth.

“Students who disclose utilizing a multitude of self-care practices throughout their training may also sustain greater resiliency and lower risk for higher levels of distress during medical education,” noted the researchers, who collected self-reported data from 871 students at 49 allopathic medical schools.

## Stress, self-care, gender and race

Self-care and the levels of perceived stress and quality of life were not spread randomly among the respondents. Male students had significantly less involvement with self-care than female students. The level of self-care was significantly higher among white students than those of other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

And perceived stress was significantly higher among female students than males. White students felt less stress than did students from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Physical quality of life was at a significantly higher level for Non-Hispanic White students than those of other racial or ethnic backgrounds

Fourth-year medical students demonstrated the highest level of self-care compared to other classes,

fared better in terms of perceived stress and quality of life.

## Eat well, sleep well, unwind well

Here is some more information about three key self-care approaches for medical students.

**Nutrition.** Don't ditch breakfast or give in to the temptation of skipping other regular, healthful meals, even in the face of shifting schedules. It can lead to loading up at far less nourishing vending machine raids or overeating once the pressure is off.

Buy healthy snack choices and carry them with you. Liquids might seem benign, but can be calorie bombs—be aware of how much sugar is in a drink and stick with water when possible.

Once in practice, you'll be telling patients to eat fruits, vegetables, leafy greens and low fat meats. Medical school is a good time to start practicing what you are going to preach.

**Sleep.** Seven to nine hours of sleep a night is the recommendation of the National Sleep Foundation. One recent study of medical students found a majority of them appear to be getting adequate amount of time under the covers, but not of quality sleep. They reported problems with sleep disturbances, snoring or shortness of breath.

Erin Ayala, PhD, lead author of the self-care study, also investigated medical student sleep for earlier published research and shared these tips with the AMA:

- | Track sleep to create a baseline for improvement.
- | Create a routine of consistent times for going to bed and rising, when possible.
- | Relax before going to bed, and once there skip the studying.
- | Take it easy with caffeine and alcohol as both interfere with good sleep.

**Mindfulness.** Yoga and meditation are often cited as powerful stress-reduction techniques. Most medical schools offer classes. It takes commitment, but the benefits of “being present in the moment” can greatly outweigh the effort of working in a daily session.

Other activities for dealing with stress and risk of burnout include making the most of peer support, exercise and journaling.