How Headspace helps physicians, medical students tame stress

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There are many system-level drivers of physician burnout, which require the attention of medical organizations. There are also some ways that physicians can work to cut stress on their own time. A surgeon, pathologist and resident physician have found one way—by practicing mindfulness meditation with the Headspace app.

To date in 2022, more than 25,000 AMA members have meditated for nearly 900,000 minutes using the Headspace app. AMA members have also engaged with content of all categories—such as meditation, sleep, move, wake up and focus—more than 1.4 million times for an average of 54,000 total engagements per month.

Among these physicians and medical students, in the past 30 days, nearly 11% use the Headspace app to manage anxiety, while more than 8% use this resource to learn about the basics of meditation and letting go of stress. Other members have reached for the Headspace app in the past 30 days to improve self-esteem (4.7%), find focus (3.6%), help with sleep (2.7%) and find balance (2.3%), among others.

In total, more than 675,000 members have engaged with the meditation content category through the Headspace app for an average of 25,000 meditation engagements each month. Additionally, members have engaged with the sleep content category—such as wind down exercises and music for sleep—648,000 times historically for about 25,300 total engagements each month.

Headspace is a meditation and sleep app that can have a positive impact on physicians and other health professionals’ personal and professional lives. AMA members can get a free, two-year subscription to Headspace.

Three AMA members—a surgeon, pathologist and resident physician—shared how they are using the Headspace app to reduce the impact of stress on their lives in medicine.


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Preoperative prep

Ravi D. Goel, MD, a comprehensive ophthalmologist and cataract surgeon in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, often uses the Headspace app for meditation before surgery. Because ophthalmologists and microsurgeons often have “back and neck issues,” mindfulness meditation can help with relaxation, he said.

“Initially, it helps with focus and relaxation. We all have different places where we throw stress—your back, your neck—and mindful meditation can help you with an almost instant relaxation,” he said. “Mindfulness meditation can have a similar effect on me as a one-hour yoga session. And with a 10-minute session before I start the day, the positive effects can last for many hours each day.

Dr. Goel has found that he can destress while becoming more mindful in the present moment for increased focus during surgeries because “it’s a power tool in my mission of protecting sight.”

Winding down

Nicole Riddle, MD, a pathologist in Tampa, Florida, uses the Headspace app to help her sleep at night.

“I have a racing mind and it helps me to have something to focus on that is relaxing and helps me fall asleep,” said Dr. Riddle. “I also use the tools—either with the phone or on my own—to get back to sleep in the middle of the night.

“I also try to use it for a five to 10-minute moment of mindfulness to help relieve stress and relax myself or calm myself down during the workday,” she added.

Dr. Riddle said that she has felt her heart rate and perceived stress level fall when she uses the app’s exercises, whether during the day or at bedtime.

“As it helps me sleep, that definitely leads to better overall health, as well as lessening stress,” she said.

Keeping up in med school


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Heather Bird, DO, an osteopathic neuromusculoskeletal manipulative medicine resident at A.T. Still University of Health Sciences in Kirksville, Missouri, almost ended medical school after her first year because of burnout and low-back pain. Fortunately, during the summer after her first year of medical school, she found meditation, which helped her regain her focus.

“My meditation practice is comparable to my toothbrushing practice—it is as important to maintain my mental wellness hygiene as it is to keep up on my physical hygiene,” said Dr. Bird. “It is one of the tools I use in the morning to greet the day and in the evening to fall asleep.”

She will also use the Headspace app in the middle of the day if she begins to “feel anxiety creeping into my day,” and uses the download capability for walking meditations.

In medical school, Dr. Bird did a clinical rotation that was close enough to walk to. Listening to the app on her walks, she would “notice the beautiful colors of the plants, birds hopping about,” seeming to “emanate joy.” That and the sunshine “energizes my vibe!” Dr. Bird said, adding that it made “going to clinic a lovely journey” and she would “arrive happy, ready to work.”

Committed to making physician burnout a thing of the past, the AMA has studied, and is currently addressing, issues causing and fueling physician burnout—including time constraints, technology and regulations—to better understand and reduce the challenges physicians face. By focusing on factors causing burnout at the system-level, the AMA assesses an organization’s well-being and offers guidance and targeted solutions to support physician well-being and satisfaction.