

## 3 coping strategies to help medical residents manage stress

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The excellent care that patients expect at teaching hospitals shouldn't come with risk to the well-being of the medical residents who do so much to provide it. The reality is that harmful stress while in training is common. Learn these techniques to cope when stress threatens to take over your life.

Insights on the science of stress and its reduction, are provided in a 19-minute training module, "Physician Health: Physicians Caring for Ourselves," designed to address the self-care needs of residents. It's one of the AMA GME Competency Education Program offerings, which include nearly 30 courses that residents can access online, on their own schedule.

Among the program's experts are several who contributed to the AMA's *Health Systems Science* textbook, which draws insights from faculty at medical schools that are part of the Association's Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

Modules cover five of the six topics—patient care, practice-based learning and improvement, interpersonal and communication skills, professionalism, and system-based practice—within the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education's core competency requirements. The sixth requirement, medical knowledge, is one that is typically addressed during clinical education.

### Three self-care activities to sample

The module's suggestions to help relieve stress often also carry some additional benefit, be it clearer thinking, weight control, better working relationships or a boost in energy. All the activities can be learned, tried out and sustained at little or no expense.

In addition to eating well, exercising regularly and getting a good night's sleep, the module offers these suggestions.

**Practice mindfulness meditation.** The module’s shorthand description is to broaden your consciousness while breathing in and out, listen to your “emotions and thoughts, and then let them pass without judgment.”

Headspace is one meditation and sleep app that can have a positive impact on health professionals’ personal and professional lives. AMA members can get a free, two-year subscription to Headspace. Any resident who has been granted access to GCEP through their residency program also gets AMA member benefits, one of which is access to Headspace.

**Pay attention to breathing.** Stress-relief breathing is a do-anywhere technique that aids in relaxation and clear thinking. Look online for the various ways to do it and regularly practice.

**Talk it out with your peers.** Residency is a classic shared experience in medicine. Make use of it by recounting stressful incidents to other residents and learn what stresses them out. The perspective it brings can be relaxing to both of you.

The module also underscores the power of empathy. Practicing empathy includes learning to listen with understanding and in ways that are neither judgmental nor self-centered. It can improve your overall outlook, as well as be a decisive factor in aiding a colleague in crisis.

“If you know of someone who seems down, depressed, or just not himself or herself, take time to reach out and listen,” says the module. “Practice empathy, and encourage that person to get help.”

## Stress: the good and the bad

The module notes that not all stress is created equally. Acute stress can be positive, powering up a physician’s effectiveness in an urgent situation, while eustress is associated with exciting, joyful situations and is fundamental to a healthy life.

However, chronic stress—stemming from repeated exposure to a harmfully stressful environment—can be overwhelming. It can result in hostility, reduced productivity, social withdrawal, impulsivity, and other negative responses.

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.

Visit the AMA GME Competency Education Program for more information on this and other offerings or to request a demo.