Women physicians often face professional isolation, impact of family responsibilities, and gender and age discrimination throughout their careers. These challenges faced by women physicians don’t disappear with age either and have only been exacerbated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. But there are measures to take to overcome issues affecting senior women physicians.

Two AMA members took time to discuss how to overcome issues affecting senior women physicians. They are:

- Jenny Boyer, MD, PhD, JD, a full-time telemedicine psychiatrist in northern Oklahoma who is employed by the Department of Veterans Affairs at the West Texas VA health care system based in Big Spring, Texas. She is also chair-elect of the AMA Senior Physicians Section Governing Council. Dr. Boyer’s views are her own and do not represent the VA.
- Claire Wolfe, MD, a retired physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist in Columbus, Ohio.

Here is what they had to say.

Work with your partner to balance duties

Learning how to juggle at-home and work duties “was in fact probably the most difficult part of practice life then—and I’m sure still now—because it usually falls to the woman as the prime responsibility no matter how supportive your spouse is,” said Dr. Wolfe. “If a child is sick and needs to stay home, most women take it on themselves to stay home with the baby rather than asking their husband to do it.”

Working together with her husband to find balance was key, she said, adding that “I would take the kids to preschool in the morning and then, because my husband’s day ended before mine, and since mine started later than his, he would pick them up in the afternoon.”
“I had extended family and a husband to help,” said Dr. Boyer, adding that, “now I am helping my employed daughters and grandchildren in order to support their careers.”

Learn more from the AMA about five ways to cut long-term impact of COVID-19 on women physicians.

Be persistent, set boundaries

“I have had some successes and some failures,” said Dr. Boyer, but “I’m very persistent and I don’t take things personally.”

For example, when called “sweetie and honey, I try to set boundaries where appropriate, but I also understand the culture,” she said. “When you understand the culture, if you’re somebody who’s not too uppity and you also are really helpful and you listen, a lot of times people will let you get by with being an older woman.”

Additionally, looking at the culture, it is important to “get people to see what you have to offer,” said Dr. Boyer. “I’m not a revolutionary, but I am very determined to sit at the table as much as I can.”

Discover why, despite advances, gender disparities persist in medicine.

Consider becoming a mentor

“There were seven women in my medical school class, so we didn’t have a lot of mentors,” said Dr. Wolfe. “At Ohio State we actually had a couple of women physicians on the faculty who took the women medical students—few as we were—under their wing and would have us over to their homes for tea, networking and talking.”

There are “all kinds of opportunities at the medical schools for mentoring,” she said.

“I’m getting a big kick out of the helping,” said Dr. Boyer. “The best job I ever had was with residents and medical students when I went back to the University of Oklahoma Department of Psychiatry.

“You have things to offer as an older woman that you don’t have to offer as a younger woman—you have more experience under your belt,” she said. “That means that you can understand things and you can kind of say things in a way that you have a perspective that’s valuable and you do have something to offer. You still have something to offer.”
Learn more from the AMA about ways to tackle challenges facing women physicians in the pandemic.

Find activities to keep you busy

“What I have had time to do is really exercise,” said Dr. Wolfe. “At my age, I keep thinking, well, you’re going to need to exercise more because you’re going to live longer that way. I have the time to do an hour or two at the rec center and I never had that time before.”

Agreeing, Dr. Boyer added that she “walks four miles daily” to remain active.

“There are so many opportunities out there and I'm not sure that women physicians really need to have specific outreach for them—they might have to do the outreach,” Dr. Wolfe said, adding that near her is Ohio State University, which allows individuals over the age of 60 to audit courses for free. “If you want to develop an interest, take a language, learn more about the arts, take up painting or opera, these are some of the things that you can do and it’s there for free,” she said. “That gives people the opportunity to easily develop other interests and things that they haven’t had time for during their practice career.”

The AMA Women Physicians Section works to increase the number and influence of female physicians in leadership roles. This group also advocates for and advances the understanding of women’s health issues. Additionally, the AMA Senior Physicians Section provides a way for physicians to remain active and involved in the Association and medical community. The group supports projects of interest to the senior physician community.