Secret weapon to combat physician stress: connecting with colleagues

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Maintaining a masked physical distance from those living outside one’s home remains a cornerstone of preventive advice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, remaining physically apart has led to social isolation for many.

While peer-support programs serve a vital role, they tend to only address the tip of the iceberg of the distress and disconnection experienced by many physicians. Going beyond peer-support programs, it is important to create processes for intentional professional connection, so no one delivers care alone.

“We are a very isolated lot and then we’ve added this whole idea of physical or social distancing, and we find ourselves disconnected from our profession, from ourselves, from our patients and from each other,” Mark Greenawald, MD, a family physician at Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, Virginia, said during an AMA webinar on professional connection.

“No one should be trying to traverse what’s been happening in health care alone,” Dr. Greenawald added.

He outlined some important attributes of a culture of well-being and connection.

Recognize good work

Looking at service, it is important that “we recognize our teammates for their good work,” said Dr. Greenawald. “If we’re not doing that daily, particularly in the time of COVID, what's the cost of that?
“What do people take home with them for the incredible work that they’re likely doing every day if we’re not creating a culture where that just comes naturally, that it’s just built into our DNA?” he added.

Discover four habits of gratitude physicians can follow to enhance well-being.

**Check in with your teammates**

Physicians should reach out to their teammates to know more about their joys and struggles. By checking in, “I’ve learned about … things that people are carrying with them when they come to work that we know impacts their ability to show up and yet I was totally blind to so many of these things before I started checking in with folks.”

**Create a positive team culture**

When it comes to attitude, it is key for physicians and other health professionals to create a positive and encouraging team culture in your organization. That is because “creating a culture of encouragement and a culture of positivity becomes even more important as we navigate COVID,” said Dr. Greenawald.

Discover how Dr. Greenawald’s peer-support program strives to ease distress during pandemic.

**Regularly connect with meaning**

Dr. Greenawald cited the words of pioneering burnout researcher Christina Maslach, PhD, who said “that ultimately, when someone’s in a state of burnout, they’re experiencing what she calls an erosion of the soul. And I like to think about our work in health care as being soul work.

“At the end of the day, it’s about meaning and it’s about purpose, so regularly connecting with those things becomes essential if we’re to be able to carry out our mission in terms of the work that we do,” he added.

**Celebrate successes**

Renewal requires individuals to take time out of their day to celebrate their successes. However,
many people rarely take time to celebrate those successes.

“Think about the implications of that in the context of the incredibly challenging work that we’re doing right now,” said Dr. Greenawald. There is a growing “need more than ever to be helping to try to fill each other up as we have a lot of things that are withdrawing from us emotionally at this point in time.”

Take time for stress reduction

Physicians need to take time for self-care, stress reduction and relaxation because many “people are working harder than they have in a long time,” said Dr. Greenawald. “We were working hard at baseline, but the hours that many people are putting in would be unthinkable one year ago.

“The need for some kind of reduction in stress becomes even more” important, he added. But the good news is that “we’ve got some secret weapons and those secret weapons are our relationships with each other and those relationships, in many ways, are untapped right now.”

Learn more from the AMA STEPS Forward™ webinar series, which focuses on physician well-being, practice redesign and implementing telehealth during COVID-19.