

Secret weapon to combat physician stress: connecting with colleagues

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Just as safe and highly effective COVID-19 vaccines became widely available in the spring of 2021, the SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant soon emerged squashing hopes for a “hot vax summer.” Then the highly transmissible Omicron variant ramped up in January.

In response, many physicians and health professionals went back to maintaining a masked physical distance from those living outside one’s home—a cornerstone of preventive advice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet by remaining physically apart, the practice has led to social isolation for too 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.

“Once we have a chance to take a deep breath and process this, there’s going to be a lot of need for support that people don’t even recognize right now,” Mark Greenawald, MD, a family physician at Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, Virginia, said during an AMA STEPS Forward™ webinar on professional connection. “One of my fears is that we will armor up again and tell everybody we’re doing just fine ... not really grieve what has happened over the last two years.”

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

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

Recognize good work

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 connection process strives to ease distress during the pandemic.

Regularly connect with meaning

Dr. Greenawald cited the words of pioneering burnout researcher Christina Maslach, PhD, who said “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

“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.”