3 keys to help resident physicians to get the exercise they need

JUL 13, 2021

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Evidence suggests that resident physicians who work out are less likely to get sick and more equipped to handle the rigors of their demanding schedules. Still, those 80-hour weeks in residency can make fitting an exercise regimen a challenge.

To respond to that, the University of Kansas School of Medicine-Wichita (KUSM-W) created a pilot program aimed at increasing resident well-being through fitness. Samuel Ofei-Dodoo, PhD, MPA, MA, CPH—one of the faculty members behind the program and co-author of a study published in the Kansas Journal of Medicine—offered insight on the barriers to resident exercise and how programs and physicians can work to overcome them.

For AMA members looking to improve their physical fitness, Gympass offers a range of plans that give access to thousands of gyms, studios and wellness apps, right at your fingertips. The options offer flexibility for in-person classes, remote training, and on-demand programs. It is one of the many benefits of AMA membership.

A space to exercise

Lack of worksite exercise facilities or gyms is a barrier to resident physicians staying physically active, says Ofei-Dodoo, an assistant professor of family and community medicine at KUSM-W.

Ideally, the gym should be close to residents’ work facility. If programs do not have worksite gym, Ofei-Dodoo suggests some sort of small space within the work setting for physical activity.

“Worksite gyms provide resident physicians the opportunity to engage in wellness activities, he said.
The time

Space to exercise is one key for residents looking to get physical; the other is time. Residency programs need to offer dedicated time for wellness and exercise, Ofei-Dodoo suggested.

What that may look like is different for busy residents, however. As part of their motivational fitness program, the KUSM-W offered alternatives to traditional exercise. If a resident couldn’t make a 30-minute run work as part of their day, the curriculum encouraged shorter, high-intensity workouts a few times a day.

“Residency programs need to reframe exercise expectations to include short but intense workouts,” Ofei-Dodoo said. “Residents are less likely to participate in hour-long workout sessions, but they are more likely to engage in high-intensity workouts that could be done in a five- or 10-minute interval.”

Learn about three ways residents can save time with those tedious, personal tasks.

Community support

Time and space are keys to ensuring residents can get the exercise they need to thrive but having support from one’s peers can also be helpful. As part of the fitness program at KUSM-W, a sense of community was built, with participants posting their workout times and scores through a shared chat. “We intentionally used our didactics times on Tuesdays to encourage and motivate resident physicians to practice selfcare, including engaging in active lifestyle,” he said. “Also, residency programs can help by developing a supportive exercise culture to help improve the overall wellness of their trainees. Additionally, exercise programs are more likely to be successful if fellow residents serve as champions to increase peer buy-in.”

For residents who participated in the KUSM-W exercise program, the benefits were numerous, Ofei-Dodoo said.

“Our findings showed that after the 10-month of the fitness curriculum, there was decreased levels of stress, anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion among the participants,” he said. “Also, the fitness program provided a sense of community for the resident physicians to connect with each other.

Additionally, the social interactions helped to improve the mental health outcomes among the participants. Working in health care environments can be stressful, so whatever we can do to reduce work-related stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and burnout is very important.”
Learn more with the AMA about what helps and hurts medical resident well-being.