

VAFP Wellbeing Corner Spring 2024

Over the last decade, we have been increasingly more aware of the topic of physician wellbeing. Burnout which is another very familiar term has been at record levels and near epidemic proportions for more than half of Family Physicians practicing medicine in the United States. Several factors have led to this including but not limited to the increased regulatory compliance burden, erosion of clinical autonomy, EMR, and staff challenges. As a result, many Family Physicians have experienced high levels of mood disorders, early retirement or career shifts, and suicide. Sadly, this takes away the joy of practicing medicine and taking care of patients, which is why at a baseline we all chose to go into this profession. Unless we are well, we cannot in turn care for our patients.

In this corner we will create a space to discuss different avenues of wellbeing in our personal and professional lives with some concrete takeaways. Each article will take a personal clinical experience as an example of our common struggles in practice and explore avenues to improve our responses.

VAFP members completed a survey last year telling us about the barriers you face in your path to wellbeing. Professionally, charting and inbox issues with the EMR and staffing ranked high. Personally, finding the need to “do it all”, a work/life balance, and the time/ability to exercise. The work we do as family physicians is powerful and fulfilling and extremely challenging on so many levels. Yes, the system around us is broken AND we can change the way we show up in our practices that nourishes us and our patients, even in the midst of a broken system.

At the start, we recommend finding just one small action you could take for yourself that brings your attention to your own well-being. For example, I (Caroline), promised myself one month where my cell phone would not be allowed at the dining table. Laurie Santos, PhD in her Happiness Lab Podcast “D for Distracted” details the research on how cell phones diminish our enjoyment of a meal and the company just by their access. By banning phones at the table, I felt more present and engaged in my family’s life and happier overall. This spiraled into less screen time, less doom scrolling, and much more face time and laughter with my kids.

My (Lola) personal journey has varied along the way from full time hospital-based practice employed to newly private practice owner. I had the opportunity to participate in the AAFP Leading Physician Well-being (LPW) 2023 cohort. This is a year-long program to help interested physicians develop leadership skills to advance the well-being of our colleagues and care teams.

As a part of the program, I attended the AAFP Physician Well-being Conference in Palm Springs, CA. I never would have otherwise thought to attend and am still blown away with the knowledge and tools I learned and took away from not just the conference but also the LPW program.

One important thing I took away from the Well-being Conference was that my health comes before that of my patients and making this a priority is a Must to preserve the joy in medicine and practice.

If you have found yourself in that place of burnout, or more likely, feeling like your day-to-day work has you in “survival” mode, consider attending the 2024 AAFP Wellbeing Conference. Here is some more information:

<https://www.aafp.org/events/physician-health-and-well-beingconference.html>

It will include more than 20 hours of CME, and our own VAFP member and Past President, Mark Greenwald, MD is serving as the conference chair for this year. Let’s be in this together.

Please send us your experiences, tips, and questions for the next issue at admin@vafp.org.

Lola Ogbonlowo, M.D.
Leesburg, VA

Caroline Blevins, M.D.
Richmond, VA