

Healing Ourselves — Self-Care Practices for Physicians

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Sarah Flick, MD

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The practice of medicine has long been understood to be a sacrificial undertaking in the service of others. Years of education and training lead to long work hours and significant responsibility. The consequences of this evolving stress layered upon an already demanding professional life can lead to risks in physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Within the folklore of medical school, medical students are taught that when a “code” is called, they should take their own pulse first.

As medicine continues to better understand the role of lifestyle management in acute and chronic illness, patients are encouraged to pursue healthier lifestyles as cost-effective interventions. How often do physicians engage in self-care practices that have proven benefit in addressing chronic stress? A brief review of some basic self-care practices may serve as a reminder of possible choices.

First, self-care practices in the physical arena are very familiar to most physicians. These are commonly recommended lifestyle habits for patients; they are, however, easier said than done. Attending to basic nutrition is a simple beginning. We all face a universe of invitations to indulge in food that can hurt rather than help us. Bookstores abound in volumes of dietary recommendations. The simple basics, though, typically come down to eating more vegetables and fruits, lean proteins, and whole grains. Fresh whole foods provide nurture and nutrition as well as enhancing immunity.

An adequate balance of movement and rest is important in self-care. Exercise often becomes unnecessarily complicated. Simply walking outside for half an hour each day is a wonderful beginning. An active lifestyle helps to offset stress and starts with whatever kind of movement leads to enjoyment and relaxation. Rest is as important as movement. Establishing a consistent rest and sleep routine supports wellness and general health.

Fundamental health maintenance is another physical self-care practice. Physicians may defer important health maintenance and periodic examinations in the context of demands that appear to be more pressing. Finding a primary care physician who we respect and with whom we are comfortable can facilitate maintaining regular health care.

A second important self-care arena is in the mental domain. Physicians are accustomed to exercising their brains at work; however, mental flexibility comes from sustained mental and emotional self-care. Most physicians conscientiously keep up with their professional education; however, the demands of work and reading the medical literature can lead to a narrowed and telescopic perspective. Understanding the contexts of national and international current events can facilitate a balanced outlook in everyday life. News can be followed on television, the internet, and by reading newspapers. Reading a Sunday newspaper can be relaxing and provides an opportunity to “catch up” in a pleasant context.

Practice cognitive flexibility by challenging yourself to explore perspectives different from your own. Watch TV news on a different channel; view a movie you might not typically choose. Crossword puzzles, Sudoku, and other mental challenges can be invigorating and relaxing.

Another self-care practice in the mental domain consists of engaging with creativity. Enjoying art, music, and the theater allows us to appreciate the creative process in others. Expressing our own creativity by painting, writing, or participating in other creative activity helps our minds stay open and aware of new possibilities. Whether we enjoy the creativity of others or express our own, this practice offers a renewed sense of wonder and awe that places our everyday stresses in a larger perspective.

A third arena of self-care is the spiritual domain. Spirituality may be considered as interior experience that leads to recognition and acknowledgement of a reality larger than our own perspective. Many physicians may be involved in traditional religious practices; those who are not may also benefit from exploration of spiritual meaning in their lives.

Values clarification is helpful in the spiritual arena. It is useful to periodically list one's highest priorities. Sometimes it is surprising to see how much of our outer activity may not align with our most important values. We are healthier spiritually when our internal and external priorities are aligned. Practicing this alignment begins with identifying our most cherished values and making a conscious decision to live in accord with them.

Belonging to some kind of community is also an important self-care practice. Traditional religious institutions provide community; so do neighborhood organizations and other common interest groups. Being in community reminds us of common purpose and encourages us to think and act beyond our own self-interests. We may also choose to ask for guidance from spiritual leaders or spiritual directors who can serve as companions for us and encourage spiritual growth.

Many physicians can recall their original sense of vocation--feeling led or called to practice medicine. Often this sense of vocation arises from a personal or family experience of illness. Our gratitude for our own healing can lead us to lives of service to others. Medicine is a healing profession and it is a privilege to be part of others' lives in this intimate way. Recalling our vocation and our gratefulness for our own health is a powerful spiritual self-care practice.

One final self-care practice encompasses the physical, mental, and spiritual arenas. It can be very helpful to schedule some amount of time periodically for quiet and reflection. Our demanding schedules often have no empty space, so it becomes important to be intentional about prioritizing time for activity that energizes and refreshes us. It might be prayer, reflection, or time for creative arts. We might choose a daily, weekly, or monthly commitment for this unstructured time. This practice yields benefits in all areas of health and can return a sense of meaning to our lives.

Practicing self-care in the physical, mental, and spiritual arenas and making a commitment to intentional times of reflection help us stay aware of our own holistic health needs and can lead us into a deeper awareness of our own lives and relationships. As healing professionals, our own health allows us to serve others with more energy and compassion. Consider these self-care practices, or many others that are possible, and explore which ones may support and strengthen your practice, your health, and your life.