

Wellness Committee

# Promoting Wellness in Resident Physicians: A Program Directors Approach

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Looking to cultivate wellness for your residency program? Not so simple, right? What does physician wellness mean? Wellness, resiliency, positivity, bouncing back – as program leaders we can't even agree on a definition, let alone on how to best implement a wellbeing program for our future generation of EM doctors. Therein lies the problem – wellness is relative to the person experiencing it. There is no

single meaning. So how do we ignite a wellbeing fire in our program for dozens of our tired, vulnerable, overworked, and stressed out residents when it may be different for each of them?

We ask them! We find out what they find meaningful, what helps them find balance, what they enjoy doing with their free time. And for most of us program directors without specific “wellness program” funding, this means we get creative.

Five years ago I sat down to write my program's official wellness policy. I thought why reinvent the wheel? Certainly this has been done before. So, I borrowed templates and copied experts from other policies. Counseling – check. Call rooms – check. Protocols to deal with drug and alcohol problems – check. Cab rides home for exhausted residents – check. Feeling proud of myself for crossing an important task off my to-do list, I re-read my new program wellness policy. We had a big problem. This was not wellness. This was manifesto of necessary afterthoughts, but not wellness. I wholeheartedly agree that these checks and balances are a necessary component of any residency program, but I was saddened to think that these were the items that I had listed on my wellness policy.

And so it began – my quest to integrate a true wellness program into our residency training. I polled my residents and asked what physician wellness meant to them and requested three things that program leadership could integrate into our program to improve wellbeing. They gave me four, of course. They asked for a place to work out and do yoga together, a medical literature book club, more social gatherings, and small celebrations (with food).

Today, in addition to the original policy, our wellness program has grown to encompass the following: (I hope you steal as many of these ideas as you can fit into your program).

- Passes to the YMCA to work out, to participate in group exercise classes, to play basketball, or to swim
- A fall wellness conference day held outside at a park that includes an hour of physical activity, and topics that lay foundation for physician wellness
- A spring wellness conference held at the YMCA that incorporates interval training between lectures and a healthy breakfast
- An annual retreat that is held outside at a state park allowing for camping the night before

- Monthly organized resident family-friendly social gatherings
- Monthly birthday breakfast celebrations at didactics
- Massage chairs during wellness week in the back of conference room
- Asynchronous learning (often from 7-8 am) to allow for an extra hour of sleep for residents on evening shift. ASL allows the resident to complete the task whenever convenient for him/her, not necessarily from 7-8.
- Creation of a narrative medicine curriculum that includes two novels per year that our group reads and discusses together upon completion
- A working walking treadmill to chart while moving.
- A mini fridge in our doc box and healthy snack options in our charting room
- A constant supply of good coffee
- Primary care provider phone number list during intern orientation
- Integrated wellness lectures to lay some wellbeing foundation
- Assigned faculty mentors and resident big-sibs prior to starting residency with the program goal of meeting in September and March (so that including the biannual reviews with the PD, the resident has someone checking in on them every three months)

I just finished the book, *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor.

The premise – that we are more successful when we are happier and more positive – is exemplified in the fact that physicians who are put in a positive mood before making a diagnosis show almost three times more intelligence and creativity than doctors in a neutral state, and they make accurate diagnoses 19% faster. So, I ask, why wouldn't we want to implement a wellbeing program to foster this? Look at cutting-edge companies that have foosball tables in their lounge, massage parlors in-house, and why employees are encouraged to bring their dogs to work. I'm not suggesting we go to the extreme, but I am suggesting five minutes in the sun, healthy available snacks, a few quiet minutes to breath after a difficult patient or tough code. I'm suggesting that these things are not only ok to do but that your return on investment will lead to bottom line results.

I am proud today of the attention we are giving to our own wellbeing, and that of our residents. Today's group of eager young physicians has different definitions of wellbeing than those who helped me originally develop our wellness curriculum five years ago. Time to ask this group what they find meaningful, what balances them, what they enjoy doing with their free time.

With the summer having flown by, I encourage each of us to ask our incoming interns and current group of residents what physician wellness means to them and how we can best support them on this journey. I think you'll find that just by asking the question, they feel heard, and that they will willingly participate in helping your leadership create a tailored wellness program. ●