

“Medice, cura te ipsum”. Physician-heal thyself

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If you google self-care, the results will suggest that you put yourself and your needs above everything else. In doing so, you become more mindful and are better able to support not only yourself, but also those that you care about. I decided for this reflection to discuss the importance of self-care.

Self-care goes beyond what is defined by the WHO. Socrates first described it as Asclepion medicine, and in Greek mythology, Asclepius was the “god of healing,” urging believers to focus on one’s self in addition to the patient.² I will not be discussing moral distress or burnout here and instead will reflect on self-care for those of us in the healthcare field.

I am sure that many of you have experienced instances of anxiety or have felt overwhelmed, either with leadership or with colleagues, and with the volume of patients getting higher and increased instances of being on call. When this happens, you tend to neglect your own spirit and sense of self. There are times you’ll want to throw your pager or your cell phone or whatever device is available. Without a doubt, the last place you want to be in is a toxic environment where you are not valued as a team member, a clinician, or both.

My journey started more than 15 years ago as a younger assistant professor, carrying as many as 45 patients receiving an inpatient service at an academic institution in Chicago. I was fortunate to have a “dream team” (you know who you are!). I have to say I was a beast (thinking now about how it is unlikely that I could carry that volume today without having an arrhythmia). Fast forward to the present: We are RVU based, being (at least within the U.S.) replaced by mid-levels and finding ourselves having to show our productivity while shouldering an increased workload.

Rachel Remen, a health care provider, states “The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet”.^{3,4} So how do we moderate our own self care? Do we eat well, exercise well, meet with those who support us, go on vacation or is it something more? How do we address the mental stress that we go through on a daily



bases? It would take more than what I just mentioned. I started meditation and even at 15 minutes a day, I can feel the difference. So then, is there a role for mindfulness? Mindfulness in the moment, in just a few minutes, can help to recharge through daily meditation. Now let’s take this from an evidence based approach given we are all health care workers. From an integrative medicine point of view, we understand that there is a mind and body connection in the development of coronary artery disease which can be the result from high emotional states. These emotional states include extreme stress and anxiety which in turn can lead to high catecholamine state and release of cortisol resulting in cardiac injury.⁵ I do believe that approaching this from a holistic total person care would be a better approach given likely underlying anxiety and stress. Integrative Medicine principles focuses on “whole person” care which includes emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physical aspects of the patient’s care and is considered to be patient centered. It combines medicine with complementary methods for managing patients with an illness and not just honing in on a single organ as is the case here. This is further confirmed in a prospective trial by Janszky

et al which showed the risk of early onset anxiety, as per ICD 8 at the time, was associated with coronary artery disease in a Swedish population of 49,321 males after a 37 year follow up.⁶ Mindfulness has been shown to reduce anxiety and stress in healthcare professionals.⁷

Another prospective randomized controlled trial by Tarun et al reviewed effects of mindful-based cognitive interventions in patients with non-cardiac disease. The study showed improvement in anxiety as well as in chest pain scores and frequency.⁸

I am here, my friends, to advise you on what you should and should not do. First off, stay focused and stay happy. Do not compromise your mental health or your physical health. You can continue to climb that ladder safely. Learn to draw boundaries and learn to say no. Learn to walk away from toxic environments that you so dread before your day even begins, and do not for one moment think it is your fault or ask if you can do more or wonder if you are selfish. You are super skilled and you matter. You have taken care of everyone, and now it's time for you to take care of yourself. Do not feel guilty for taking care of yourself. Learn to value yourself. And lastly, understand your own goals, both professionally and personally.

The author Morgan Harper Nichols said it best: “Even when there are a thousand things to do, cherish these unrushed moments. Make room in your heart for them. There will be many mountains to climb, but always make time to find the pastures where you can rest. Let today be the day you are kind to yourself and focus on what is beautiful and true... One day you will look back and see that all along you were blooming.”⁹

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