



Residents take part in a group meeting at the Rodin Sculpture Garden.

prescribing mindfulness

BY RACHEL LEVIN
PHOTO BY TOM ANTAL

The PRIME resident wellness program seeks to build support systems, promote self-care and alleviate physician burnout.

When Stanford anesthesia resident Clarity Coffman, MD, returned to her full-time work at the hospital following two months of maternity leave in the fall of 2018, she found the transition to be one of the most challenging periods of her life. On top of the sleep deprivation inherent in caring for a newborn and working long hours to serve patients, Coffman was also beset with a host of fears that many new mothers have.

"Is my baby going to be OK?," she wondered. She fretted about missing precious time with her daughter and felt as if the period of intense anxiety would never come to an end. "I shed a lot of tears," says Coffman. "I was kind of getting lost in my mind."

With her exhaustion and feelings of hopelessness, Coffman was exhibiting some of the cardinal signs of burnout, a term first coined by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s to describe the consequences of severe stress common in helping professionals, who make many personal sacrifices to care for others. This stress is particularly pronounced in anesthesia, where doctors are regularly exposed to traumatic situations in the operating room and often work in isolation from their colleagues. And, on top of that, Coffman was caring for a newborn.

Luckily, she found relief and persevered through her moments of intense stress by leaning on the coping skills and the supportive network she found through participation in the anesthesia department's Peer Support and Resiliency in Medicine resident wellness program, known as PRIME. The program was founded in 2010 to help address the issue of burnout.

It is beneficial especially during

the residency years, when the volume of distress can really get turned up.

"This is a group of people in their 20s and early 30s, for the most part," says clinical associate professor Jody Leng, MD, of anesthesia residents. She adds that there is a lot happening during those years, from major events such as getting married to having children. "When you combine [those events] with residency training, which can be really intense and inflexible, it can really elevate things."

In fact, up to nearly 70 percent of physicians may experience burnout, according to studies. Through a weekend PRIME retreat at the start of their CA-1 years and regular follow-up sessions every six to eight weeks for the remainder of their residencies, those who participate in the program learn stress-reducing meditation techniques and other evidence-based wellness strategies. Additionally, by sharing in these sessions about the pressures they are facing, residents make genuine and lasting connections with colleagues that help strengthen their resilience.

Now edging closer to life after residency, Coffman says, "I can't really imagine having survived residency without PRIME."

A SELF-CARE TOOLBOX

PRIME's core principles are based upon the research of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., an emeritus professor and founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. According to Stanford's well-being director and clinical assistant professor Natalya Hasan-Hill, MD — who co-directs the PRIME program with Leng — Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress-reduction work is grounded in the notion that maintaining resilience begins with cultivating self-awareness. Hasan-Hill says if individuals have self-awareness, they can self-manage in times of stress by taking care of themselves and reaching out for helpful resources.

The wellness retreat and regular

gatherings are intended to encourage residents to fortify that connection to self. "Each session we have at the retreat and also throughout the year typically begins with a meditation focused on self-compassion or just being in the present moment," says Hasan-Hill.

The various meditation practices that calm the mind can serve as a toolbox that residents can carry with them into the hospital or other realms of their lives — even when they are strapped for time.

"I accept I don't have the time to be [meditating] in some fancy studio or surrounded by burning incense," says Daniel Orlovich, MD, the department's inaugural chief resident of wellness.

Every day, he finds ways to use mindfulness techniques while he is in the trenches. "[I do so] whether it is [by] reminding myself to take three deep breaths when washing my hands when I am on a 24-hour shift or walking into the hospital and writing down on my phone three things I'm grateful for," he says.

And, when a difficult case arises or something goes wrong during a procedure, PRIME residents can draw upon meditations focused on self-compassion to avoid negative self-talk about the event, which can compound the stress. These meditations help residents learn to talk to themselves "as a friend would, as opposed to going through the critical voices that we all tend to have within ourselves," says clinical instructor Cynthia Khoo, MD, who completed her residency at Stanford and is now a PRIME faculty facilitator.

RESIDENTS ARE IN IT TOGETHER

In addition to building internal resources to cope with stress, PRIME participants also cultivate external bonds with one another as they swap stories during wellness sessions. "After each meditation, we practice mindful listening," says Hasan-Hill. "As we listen to people, we're not thinking of giving them advice or answering their questions. We're just taking in what they're saying nonjudgmentally."

In this safe space, says Hasan-Hill, people feel free to share very deep personal and professional stories.

"It's kind of like Fight Club: The No. 1 rule of the PRIME sessions is 'Everything stays in PRIME sessions,'" says Lynn Kalin Ngai, MD, who recently completed her residency at Stanford and will be staying on for a fellowship.

That sense of privacy and intimacy has made Ngai feel secure enough to debrief on everything that had happened with her over the six



Residents walk across campus on a sunny day; some have found walking to work helps their mood.

A HEALTHY COMMUTE

For those who walk or ride their bikes or scooters to work, the time spent soaking up the sun and taking in the fresh air is worth it — even for the miles they put in doing so, which is viewed as a benefit.

“Walking home from work is an excellent way to decompress for me,” says CA-3 Christine Stypula, MD, of her commute from the Stanford campus. “It’s nice to have 20 minutes outdoors to listen to music and reflect on the day at work before I get home. By the time I get home I feel like I’ve had my ‘me time,’ so I’m ready to be present for the rest of my evening.”

That ability to decompress from what could be a stressful day is an important part of well-being. Physician burnout is said to have reached epidemic proportions, with 67 percent of physicians reporting burnout.

Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a sense of reduced accomplishment are all subcomponents that can lead to burnout.

Those who walk or ride their bikes to work say that it does help their moods to do so. It is also less expensive than buying a parking pass or gas for a car, and for those who are from commuter-friendly cities such as New York City, walking was simply a way of life before they arrived at Stanford.

Still others say they initially walked or rode a bike to campus out of necessity. “I initially started because we didn’t own a car, so I walked two miles each way,” says CA-3 Greg Atkinson, MD, of himself and his wife. “But I fell in love with the personal time to listen to podcasts or just ponder and enjoy the outdoors. I’ve continued walking or riding a bike ever since.”

Atkinson, Stypula and others have chosen their apartments based upon their proximity to campus, so that their commutes are easy. Of course, Stypula says she does drive when going to work at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System or to the Valley.

Regardless, how would Atkinson encourage others to leave their cars at home and bike or walk to work whenever possible? “Tell them they [will] have more cheat days,” he says, referring to eating donuts.



Natalya Hasan-Hill, MD

weeks between PRIME sessions.” It was often very eye-opening to myself and to everyone how much weight we had been carrying with us since we saw each other last,” she says.

Among the benefits to the group sharing is that people quickly start to realize that they are not all alone in feeling something, says Hasan-Hill. “It creates that sense of connection,” she says of another pillar of Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness-based stress-reduction work.

Not only do residents contribute, but each trained faculty facilitator who is assigned to lead a specific cohort of residents shares his or her struggles as well. In this way, says Orlovich, the faculty demonstrate strength by making themselves vulnerable and sharing personal stories and techniques to increase the authenticity and credibility of their guidance.

Moreover, PRIME faculty support is not limited to time during sessions. “I can call or text [faculty] anytime of the day or night and I know that they support me, that they can give me their insight and perspective if I need it,” Orlovich says.

Coffman cites faculty support as one of the most helpful factors in getting her through the transition back to the hospital from maternity leave. She says that Leng — who had two children of her own during her residency at Stanford — lent a caring ear when she saw that Coffman was struggling. “She offered words of advice that ‘It’s not forever, you’re going to get through it, the baby will be fine,’” says Coffman. “Just having someone who’s been through it before reach out to me

and really reassure me that everything was going to be OK was really helpful. I wasn’t able to come to those conclusions on my own.”

SHAPING TOMORROW’S LEADERS

As much as PRIME faculty make themselves available for guidance, residents very much take ownership of the program by contributing their own wellness initiatives via the PRIME scholarship program. “Anything that a resident wants to do that they think will somehow contribute to wellness either in the department, among their colleagues, or in the greater anesthesia community,” says Leng, “they can apply and get funding to do it.”

In past years, recipients have received funding for hands-on projects to improve the resident lounge, teach fellow residents healthy cooking skills and implement a monthly yoga class.

Awardees have also used their funds to pursue additional wellness training and research. For example, during her residency, Khoo completed a compassion cultivation course at Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, while Orlovich has been awarded a scholarship to write an e-book on resident burnout and practical solutions to address it.

A perennial department favorite is the Anesthesia Trainee Wall of Fame project, which seeks to address the isolation many residents feel during practice by highlighting on a monthly basis one resident from each class who has done

something extraordinary. Ngai, who was featured one month as “Anesthesia MVP” for her spirit of perseverance, describes the Wall of Fame as a fun thing that makes residents feel like people are watching what they do. She adds that when you do something good, it should be recognized.

The support, sharing and learned approaches to mindfulness help to reach the overarching goal of PRIME, which is to gradually change the culture of the medical training environment from one that has historically been focused upon competition and self-sacrifice to one that emphasizes interdependence and self-care. While Leng acknowledges that the program can only go so far in moving the needle, as she says it takes an administrative and systemic change to affect the culture of wellness, Hasan-Hill is hopeful for the future.

She believes that, ultimately, residents who are invested in PRIME and its principles can become part of those administrative solutions. “If we can train a group of tomorrow’s leaders with these foundations,” says Hasan-Hill, “they’re going to be very mindful and compassionate leaders.” **SA**