

From Burnout to Balance: Applying the 4 Disciplines of Execution to Fellow Well-Being

I work at MD Anderson Cancer Center in the Heme/Onc Fellowship program, which has 42 fellows across a three-year program. Each year, we graduate approximately 14 fellows and bring in 14 new ones. I am there for each fellow, every day of their fellowship, through the good, the bad, and the ugly! Over the years, I have seen how complex and interconnected wellness is for both fellows and staff. Research is increasingly showing the connections between mind and body, emotional and mental health, nutrition, social wellness, and community well-being. "My ultimate goal is to ensure that every fellow in our program receives support for all dimensions of their wellness, as recommended by the American Medical Association's guidelines for resident and fellow well-being (American Medical Association, 2025)". Integrative wellness takes a whole-person approach, addressing each aspect of well-being to help fellows thrive both personally and professionally.

I'd like to increase fellow participation in structured wellness activities to 90% by the end of the academic year to improve overall well-being and reduce the rising rate of burnout. The hospital has suggested that a wellness committee is needed, but I'd like to go one step farther and make it more customized for our fellows and their needs as well as scheduled. I am planning structured wellness activities, as well as a few unconventional ones! All activities will be informal, to enhance the "less pressure and more productivity" approach. Stress leads to burn out which affects the quality of so many things, from patient care to personal well-being. "Embedding wellness activities into fellowship training aligns with ACGME guidelines, which recognize that promoting trainee well-being is integral to high-quality education and patient care (ACGME, 2024)." I'd like to see these fellows continue in their careers, doing what they love to do. Im putting together a 6-month fellowship wellness plan since it's already so late in our own physical year. By putting this in place, I can evaluate and tweak any points by the beginning of our next class year. The entire class meets every Tuesday and while they are all in one place, I will introduce them to the wellness plan.

Month 1:

One Check-In at a Time- We will discuss stress management and burnout recognition and try a 5-minute mindfulness meditation. "Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and improve emotional regulation among physicians (West, Dyrbye, & Shanafelt, 2018)". There is no one-way to do this, and every person is different.



- I'll take suggestions - reiterate the benefits and the necessity for overall good health.
- Every week we will start the didactic conferences with the 5-minute meditation and stress the "at least give it a try" theme and continue with daily self-beneficial down time.
- Each week we will discuss the pros and cons of this exercise.

Month 2:

Partner Up, Connect- I will introduce a "buddy system", where the fellows will pair up for 15 minutes every few days, just to check on each other.

- This will build rapport with others and emphasize empathy.
- Maybe changing partners every two weeks could continue the harmonious feel among each other.
- This will be added to the meditation and continue throughout the wellness sessions.
- At this time, I will make sure any fellow achievements are recognized as well.

Month 3:

Step Up, Recharge, Thrive- This month, just to spice things up a bit, we will have a walking conference!



- We will meet in a new space, as outdoors is not usually a good choice for us! I will suggest a step count challenge with small prizes as incentives.
 - Since physical recharging will be at the fore front, I am going to review things like eating healthy on busy clinic days.
 - I will add little things as I see them pop up, such as relaxation and self-care with rest and adequate sleep suggestions or reminders.
- Since I'm dealing with physicians, I will gently remind them to engage in restorative physical, mental, and emotional activities.

There is no room for energy vampires! Boundaries, in general, are needed in everyday life, no matter who we are.

Month 4:

Resilience and coping emotionally- are important skills, much needed by our physicians, especially since they deal with cancer patients daily.

- Our fellows are from different countries and have different beliefs, so I'm not sure any type of speech or talk from a therapist or outside physician would be helpful in their coping skills.
- I think they would be more comfortable with an emotion focused therapist. A cognitive behavioral therapist might be helpful as well, since it usually involves efforts to change thinking patterns.

"Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and emotion-focused interventions have been shown to help healthcare professionals manage stress and develop adaptive coping strategies (Lebares et al., 2018)".

Month 5:

Career Wellness - quick workshop to have senior faculty share stories on maintaining balance during career transitions.

- I will have fellows share personal strategies that support their well-being. The stress of loan repayments, contracts, and just trying to keep afloat in a sea of uncertainty just adds to their anxiety, which turns into more stress.
- We've got to try and even the playing field for our fellows.
- A few coping skills thrown in along the way can't hurt!

Month 6:

Reflection- This meeting will have the fellows share their stories about growth, resilience, and surviving the fellowship so far!

- This would be more of a fun gathering, very lighthearted.
- We could discuss what activities were helpful and what we could do over the next 6 months to enhance our wellness plan.
- It is important that wellness is realized as crucial to the fellows' long-term success and good health, both physical and mental.



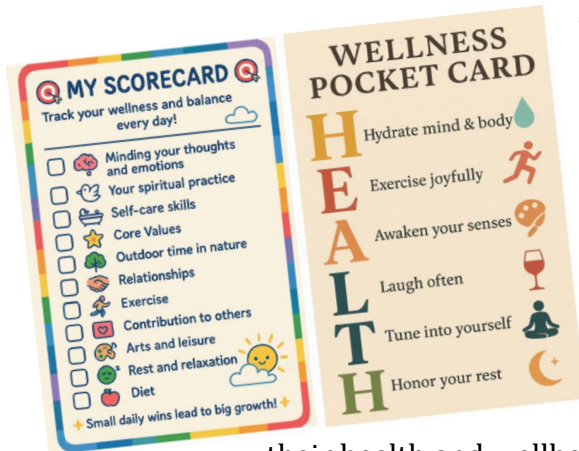
- Involving senior faculty in each meeting, seeing their participation and hearing their input, hopefully the fellows will prioritize their own wellness.

Scoreboards and Pocket cards, Oh My!

I'm planning a scoreboard specifically for each of the fellows as well as a different one for the meetings. The fellows will have a pocket card, something they can carry and easily see during the day. I'm hoping this will help make incremental changes across the dimensions of health and across their day. "Burnout is not only highly prevalent but is significantly higher among physicians than the general U.S. population, further justifying the need for deliberate interventions in training programs (Shanafelt et al., 2012)." My goal is to help the fellows monitor

their health and wellbeing more carefully and more regularly. The things thrown at us all daily are enough to keep us distracted. I sincerely hope the individual scorecard gives the fellows a variety of accommodations that will improve their health and wellness options, while making their days a little more relaxed. The scoreboard available at each wellness meeting will be our H.E.A.L.T.H. guide with activities and/or suggestions listed. The scores can be reported and discussed, bringing continuity and connection within the class. Collectively, we can discuss any barriers or challenges they still might be facing. I will diligently attempt to have each fellow make one commitment, out loud and I'm hoping for and encouraging the "snowball effect", where it will all start rolling, once that ball is thrown! I hope by starting small and simple, building momentum, staying consistent while addressing any roadblocks, I will have successfully created a sustainable wellness plan.

In addition, to the planned, weekly wellness activities, each holiday or changing season, I will add additional fun exercises that will include prizes and handouts. We have a pet therapy program here as well, but unfortunately, it stays



booked far in advance. Even though, I will make strong attempts to book a pet therapy session as a bonus activity! My hope is that our wellness class will be anticipated, not dreaded.

References

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