

When I first began my medical career almost 48 years ago, the words burnout and wellness were not yet defined. Medical school and residency were rites of passage replete with long days and even longer nights on call. Little, if any, attention was paid to our emotional and physical wellbeing. Fortunately, most of us survived often through sheer determination and an innate desire to succeed at a most demanding task. Failure was not an option.

Once a physician, new stresses appeared to compound the traditional ones that included the simple act of caring for sick patients. Navigating the nascent paradigm of hospital integrations and networks, dealing with the arcane rules and regulations of the insurance conglomerates, treating more and more patients with less and less available time, appreciating the benefits and drawbacks of the electronic medical record as it changed the nuanced relationship between doctors and their patient – all evoking anxiety, frustration and fatigue.

Is there a magic potion in our collective leather bags that can assuage the fear of losing relevancy and meaning in our professional lines? I think not.

The answers may be found in the preservation of our humanity, in the wellness of our body, mind and soul. Explore what brings you happiness and fulfillment, what ignites passion and enthusiasm in your professional life. Establish enduring friendships because medicine can, at times, be a very lonely place. Listen to the counsel of friends and family. Never underestimate the importance of play and humor in this demanding and sometimes unforgiving discipline. A resounding laugh is a wonderful elixir. Share your experiences with students and residents. Your oral history is precious and when passed down, it will become your legacy. Establish deep and abiding relationships with your patients. Great satisfaction can be derived from the honesty and trust that follows. Never be afraid to show your vulnerability, to say that you are sorry or that you do not know. Your patients will appreciate your humanness. Lastly, treat yourself with kindness, you deserve it.

These are mere sign posts staked along a sometimes challenging and serpiginous path possibly of worth because your patients deserve a contented and unburdened physician.

Least I forget, the act of giving can be both exhilarating and joyful. Good for the heart and the mind. The UVM Medical Center has myriad initiatives that focus on healthcare provider wellness. Who knows when any of us may need such compassionate support and guidance.

- Frank Ittleman, M.D.
Professor of Surgery