

# Workplace wellness, it's a thing!

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Dr Braganza is an Emergency Physician at Gold Coast Health, Queensland. She strives to incorporate wellness into her workplace, for herself and for her team.

Emergency medicine is a team sport. Therefore, whether we are talking about performance, productivity or wellness, it behoves us to think about these things at a team level.

As clinicians, we know more about wellness and self-care than most people. Our challenge is not in the knowing – it's in the doing.

What gets in our way is simple: no time, no energy or volition, or even the stigma around struggle and being seen to have to pay attention to self-care.

It is a paradox that once we start to feel emotionally or physically fatigued, the first commitments that we jettison tend to be the ones that typically recharge us – exercise, attention to nutrition, socialising and staying connected. This triggers a downward spiral that can be dark and dangerous.

Thinking about wellness at a team level, and even as a workplace agenda, might help us to address some of these barriers. The five strategies below are just a few of the things you can look to implement in your ED, to improve overall wellness for yourself and staff alike.

### 1. Engage staff: cognition before emotion

When we reach out to a patient, we try to employ the strategy of 'emotion before cognition' – addressing their emotional concerns before our cognitive response.

So, for example:

Patient – 'I can't breathe'.

Clinician (emotional response) – 'I can see that it feels difficult for you. We have started our treatment and I'm hopeful you'll be feeling better in a short while'.

Clinician (cognitive response) – 'Well, your sats are 94% so you're doing just fine'.

When working to engage colleagues with some inherent scepticism and cynicism, we have found that putting a performance frame on our activity is met with more acceptance. Perhaps we are more comfortable talking about how we work than how we feel. Yet the goal remains the same; to start conversations by creating safe spaces for them within our workplace. Wellness by stealth!

Engaging medical and nursing leadership has been a vital first step. If a senior person in the room can start a busy handover by stating 'The day we feel we have no time for this [a brief wellness pause] is the day we need it the most', that makes a powerful statement regarding the department's attitude and value of our own wellbeing.

### 2. Keep the activity brief, simple and embeddable

It would be great if we had an allocated half hour each working day to sit quietly and meditate, but we don't. Even if we did, we'd probably spend it catching up on administrative tasks because that is how we are wired as emergency clinicians.

What we do have is brief periods in the day where we are literally forced to stand still – these are opportunities to, in fact, be still. While you're waiting for your blood gas to process, you could take a couple of deep and easy breaths. While you're logging into EMR, you can pay attention to the pressure of your feet against the floor.

Activity doesn't need to be long or sophisticated. Each time you slow down and drag your mind away from what just happened or what's going to happen next, and simply focus on the present moment, you can reset and recharge.

### 3. Make it fun, without making it cringey. What the heck – make it cringey

Our most warmly received activities have been the ones where we have taken the risk and tried to galvanise our team into some kind of connecting activity. Last year, we coordinated a flash mob to respond to our receipt of a hospital wellness award. On Valentine's Day, we allowed staff entering the handover room to choose how they would like to be greeted by a few of us: handshake, fist bump, hug or happy dance.

You may be surprised at how effective the cringey stuff can be. Those moments when we laugh with each other, even if our eyes are rolling, are the moments that build connection. Later, in the resus room, when you're feeling overwhelmed, you may feel just a bit more comfortable to ask your colleague for help.

### 4. Don't be discouraged by the negative voices

The negative voices tend to be the loudest, so it's likely that any air time will be occupied by those who feel strongly that these activities are silly/unnecessary/a waste of valuable time. For every one loud negative voice, I have had dozens of quiet voices who will approach me (and others) and share how the activity was valuable for them and why. From nursing students to veteran consultants, from the ED corridor to the tearoom to the clinical pod, colleagues have shared their stories and – I hope – they have felt validated and heard.

### 5. This is about nothing more than starting the conversation and building our community

Our efforts towards clinician wellness in the workplace will not fix depression or mental illness. They probably won't make more than a dent in burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. What we hope our efforts will do, however, is start a conversation that may otherwise have gone unspoken, to enable the sharing of a story that may otherwise have gone unheard, and build a connection between people who work together, relentlessly, in challenging circumstances, and who may otherwise have felt isolated.

It doesn't really matter what your effort looks like. The most important thing is that you make one and that you start today.