

Perspective: Responding to the Well-Being of Health Care Workers and Learners in Academic Medicine During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the well-being of healthcare professionals in unprecedented ways, including increasing risks of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and distress [1]. The faculty, trainees and learners at Emory University School of Medicine (SOM) provide care to patients in more than twenty hospitals and clinics across metropolitan Atlanta. They all may experience negative impacts on well-being in the wake of COVID-19. The SOM's Wellness Working Group (WWG), established in 2017, has increased transparency, engagement and coordination of wellness programming across the diverse, complex academic medical center. Using its existing infrastructure, the WWG provided an institution-wide coordination and rapid response to well-being challenges posed by COVID-19.

Members from the SOM, Faculty Staff Assistance Program (FSAP), Healthy Emory and The Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics (CCSCBE) meet monthly via the WWG. The CCSCBE supports research and training for compassion-based meditation [2]. SOM members include Executive, Associate, and Assistant Deans of Graduate Medical Education (GME) and Undergraduate Medical Education (UME), departmental faculty wellness ambassadors, residents, and students.

FSAP comprises a multidisciplinary team providing education and outreach, team dynamics, and mental health services for Emory employees and their families [3]. Healthy Emory is a comprehensive wellness strategy under the Division of Human Resources [4]. Each of these entities may exist at other academic centers, but, to our knowledge, they lack the multidisciplinary coordination provided by the WWG.

APPROACH

In March 2020, Emory's WWG recognized the need for increased connection and support across the SOM. Shanafelt et al. (2020) organized sources of anxiety for healthcare professionals during the

COVID-19 pandemic into five basic requests: hear me, protect me, prepare me, support me, and care for me [5]. The WWG has utilized this framework to mobilize a comprehensive approach to addressing the well-being of Emory's stakeholders, as detailed below.

System-Wide Support

In response to COVID-19, the WWG members hosted the "Wellness Forum" to present existing support resources across the Emory University enterprise, and inquire about the acute needs of staff and faculty. From April 2 to April 17, students completed an online survey to assess learner needs and opportunities for increased support from the SOM. Similar to healthcare systems nationwide [6, 7] concerns included PPE availability, exposure of family members, childcare, self-care, and exacerbation of anxiety and depression.

To provide open and timely communication, the SOM held twice-weekly town halls to address questions and disseminate information. Daily Emory Healthcare emails conveyed information regarding testing, PPE distribution, childcare services, and hotel partnerships to reduce work-to-home COVID-19 exposures. Staff and faculty in emergency, medical, intensive care, and labor and delivery units received training on PPE use. Emory committed to keeping salaries whole while instituting a hiring freeze.

FSAP: Faculty and Staff

The FSAP collaborated with the Department of Psychiatry, Spiritual Health, and Nursing Services to increase access and awareness of existing behavioral mental health services, such as coaching and counseling, case management, critical incident response debriefings, suicide prevention support, and 24-hour on-call crisis intervention. Daytime and evening hours were expanded, and telemental health consultations with licensed professional counselors, social workers and psychologists were introduced. New initiatives also included a virtual daily refresh break, customized educational webinars, and debriefing sessions centered on stress management, grief, and resilience.

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SOM Departmental Wellness Ambassadors

The Wellness Ambassadors serve as liaisons between SOM departments, trainees and the WWG. They coordinate initiatives between FSAP, GME, and UME members, while highlighting programming from Healthy Emory and the CCSCBE. These combined efforts have included: Healthy Emory's annual Move More Challenge, CCSCBE's daily livestream meditation; multidisciplinary forums on parenting, caregiving, and working from home; a "Caring for our Caregivers" lunch and learn, and Grand Rounds presentations in multiple departments.

The Wellness Ambassador serves as the intermediary to interpret the unique needs of their respective departments while ensuring system-wide collaboration. The GYN-OB Wellness Ambassador led the creation of a weekly "Wellness Wednesday" newsletter consolidating key resources, centered on general, psychological, financial, and environmental wellness. The GYN-OB department also hosted a "Sew-Your-Own-Mask" virtual class and food donation sites for frontline staff. The Surgery Wellness Ambassador spearheaded the creation of virtual daily yoga sessions available to the entire Emory community. The Radiology Ambassador created a departmental website housing both Emory and community COVID-19 resources. The Ambassadors are unified stewards of these well-being initiatives.

UME: Student Representatives

Frequent and transparent communication on the UME level has been key to student wellness. The Deans of Medical Education sent daily email updates; ongoing town halls and small group sessions allowed two-way communication between faculty and students. Students created a COVID-19 response website to centralize communications, academic and mental health resources, and community engagement opportunities. The website provided daily livestream yoga and meditation, reflective writing activities, and links to online wellness resources. Wellness Ambassadors shared the site with their departments, facilitating communication between students, trainees, and faculty.

Remote education activities such as specialty-specific electives and a COVID-19 course entitled "Pathogenesis to Pandemic" were created for ongoing learning. The curriculum was restructured to ensure completion of requirements without delaying graduation. An Emory-wide emergency relief fund provided financial support for students. Regular SOM communications reminded students of available mental health resources, including virtual Emory Counseling and Psychological Services appointments.

DISCUSSION

As academic medical centers reviewed the data for managing wellness during a pandemic, our WWG was able to immediately mobilize an effective, multidisciplinary approach. The FSAP hosted 36 group support sessions with 1,629 participants over six weeks. The collection of targeted wellness programs provided by each branch of the WWG saw robust participation from all stakeholder groups, highlighting the increased demand for these services across the Emory community. Broad engagement—from learners to senior faculty and staff—illustrates our comprehensive approach to sharing well-being strategies.

As states reopen, our learners, faculty, and staff are returning to a "new normal" in academic medicine. The WWG will shift our focus from initial crisis response to transition and recovery. We will host open forums to understand the individual and collective needs of all stakeholders. Additional research on the impact of COVID-19 on individuals and departments will inform our response to future high-stress situations. Emory University School of Medicine has modeled a culture of well-being across the medical professional lifespan, and the availability of a WWG provides an approach to systemic wellness that academic medical centers can model.

Conflicts of Interest: none

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