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RAP

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Putting Relationships on Hold: A Good Idea?

This is a critical stage of my career, you tell yourself. I don't have time to invest in any relationship right now. It'll just have to wait.

The demands of residency can discourage anyone from starting a relationship, and can derail existing ones. Yet it's important not to isolate yourself from friends, family members and your spouse or partner.

Social Ties Enhance Health

"Residency is a busy, stressful time," says Pascale H. Lane, MD. Lane is Associate Dean for Faculty Development and Professor of Pediatrics, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. "Unless our own emotional needs are met, we cannot provide optimal care for



"Having someone wonder where you are when you don't come home at night is a very old human need."

- Margaret Mead

our patients. We are social animals; that is why solitary confinement is a punishment. Without appropriate interactions, we can suffer physically and emotionally."

"You need to make your relationship at least as important as your work," says author and Certified Dating/Relationship Coach Kimberly Dawn Neumann. "Isolation will kill a relationship, and it will also leave you lonely and unsupported."

Research has shown that people with strong social ties also endure stress better and are overall in better health, Neumann says. "These aren't fabricated benefits, they're real. All work and no social time can make you less effective at work. You lose sight of what's important in life. Your interactions with patients may suffer if you forget what it's like to have human contact and support."

Practical Ways to Connect

Relationships aren't easy even when you aren't a resident, Neumann notes. "Throw in the time constraints of a high-pressure job like those in medicine and it becomes even

Relationships can take a back seat during residency. Yet it is those very relationships that can give you extra resilience. When you're torn between work and personal relationships and the pressure starts to build, it's okay to ask for help. Your Resident Assistance Program can be an ideal resource. The caring professionals at RAP are available around the clock to listen to your concerns and guide you through the challenges of residency.

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more challenging. The most important thing is to remember to let the object of your affection know that he or she is still vitally important to you. That means utilizing whatever means you have at your disposal to get that message across."

"Residents today have so many more ways to communicate than I did in training," says Lane. "Phone contact, even long-distance, now carries trivial costs. Our electronic devices let us see friends and family in real-time. Limited duty hours now assure house staff some days off, so there are more opportunities to see nearby friends and family. Yes, your faculty members expect some of that time to involve reading and learning; however, part of being a professional is maintaining your

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Your Emotional Bank Account

The late writer and motivational speaker Dr. Stephen R. Covey used the metaphor of the Emotional Bank Account when describing effective relationships. “Like a financial bank account, you can make deposits and take withdrawals from the account,” Covey wrote.¹

Deposits may include gestures of caring, appreciation, patience, understanding and support. Ideally, you invest at least as much emotional capital as you withdraw.

“It’s important to make sure the person who is investing in you feels like they’re getting a fair return on investment,” says author and relationship coach Kimberly Dawn Neumann. “If someone starts to feel like they’re giving continually without getting anything back, they’ll start to question the bond you have.”

A deposit to your emotional bank account needn’t be huge. “Sometimes it’s the littlest gestures that make the difference—a text or a love note left on the refrigerator, for example. But if you’ve been a little ‘missing in action,’ it’s also nice to send flowers or a card—something that says ‘My life is crazy, but that doesn’t stop me from thinking about you.’ It’s about letting the other person know they’re a priority, even though you may not be able to be present as often as you’d like.”

¹ <http://www.stephencovey.com/blog/?p=24>

Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.

Gary L. Wood & Associates, P.A.
4700 N. Habana Avenue Suite 300
Tampa, FL 33614
RAP Helpline: 813-870-3344
www.woodassociates.net

Editor

Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D.
PAlexander@woodassociates.net

Writer

Susan H. Burnell, APR

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own mental health. Close caring relationships help with that task.”

“Technology should never be used to carry on entire relationships,” Neumann cautions. “Important conversations shouldn’t be held via text or email—there is too much room for misinterpretation. Keeping that caveat in mind, however, today’s technological advances do make it easier than ever to stay connected even when your physical face-to-face time is limited.”

A well-timed text message in the middle of the day to a loved one will show that they’re not only on your mind, but close in heart, says Neumann. “Also consider apps like ‘HeyTell,’ which allow you to send quick voice messages without actually calling. There is something about hearing the intonation and emotion that makes that kind of tech message more intimate and warm.”

Worthwhile Effort

“The most important thing is always checking in and keeping the bond strong,” Neumann advises. “Don’t let a day go by without some kind of contact. Set a time if you have to and treat it as something that cannot be canceled and is just as important as a Board exam or a meeting with a patient. A relationship cannot be maintained without effort.”

Lane and her husband will celebrate 30 years of marriage this year. “We had our wedding ceremony midway through his final year of medical school and then spent a year apart while he started residency,” she says. “That was a hard year. We spent a lot of time on the phone. Even when we were in the same city, he was often on call. We had to learn to respect one another’s needs. The person coming home from call just wanted to shower and head to bed; however, acknowledging the other person’s presence can make them feel less lonely.”

Learn Communication and Time Management Skills

Good communication skills can help you maintain relationships at home and at work. “No matter how smart you are and how much you know; if you cannot communicate with your patients, you cannot help them get well,” Lane emphasizes.

Successful time management has benefits on and off the job as well. “Time management is vital not just while you’re a resident, but for the rest of your career,” says Neumann. “Stress isn’t healthy in any capacity, and the overscheduled will likely succumb to its negative effects. Find that balance now, and avoid burnout later.”

Resources

Pascale H. Lane, MD www.pascalelane.net

Kimberly Dawn Neumann www.KDNeumann.com

Academic Women for Equality Now www.awenow.org

HeyTell voice messaging app www.HeyTell.com

The Real Reasons Men Commit (Adams Media, 2008) and *Sex Comes First: 15 Ways to Save Your Relationship without Leaving Your Bedroom*, (Adams Media, 2009), both by Joel D. Block and Kimberly Dawn Neumann