



# College of Pharmacy

## **Work Life Journey Advice From Well-being Experts: Lessons Faculty & Staff Should Not Ignore as They Move Forward**

**April 2021**

Recently, we spoke to pharmacy faculty and staff experts from around the U.S. and have compiled a list of recommendations moving forward in this ever-changing environment. Their consensus? It may be tough, but we can find ways to simultaneously work productively and live a life of fulfillment and contentment.

**Interview Question 1:** Faculty and staff members across schools report mental exhaustion due to the pandemic, experiencing high levels of stress, hopelessness, anger, and grief. They report heavy workloads and say their work-life balance has deteriorated. Many say they miss the “human connection” in teaching, and more than one-third have considered changing careers and leaving higher education. If you had to suggest the top ways to better achieve work life integration in this ever-changing environment, what would be your suggestions?

- ❖ Develop priorities based on time and values.
- ❖ Create shared understanding about expectations in all life areas.
- ❖ Set boundaries for your own behavior (not behavior of others) and commit to them.
- ❖ Overall – just adding self-care into the culture of our school has helped!
- ❖ It sounds counter-intuitive, but our school added 2 voluntary workgroups that have enhanced our culture, our connections, and our mental health: We have a faculty wellness group, and a student wellness group. Each group is made up of faculty, staff, and student volunteers, and we meet monthly to come up with ideas and then implement. It seems that even little acts make a BIG difference. For example, faculty sunshine club puts out birthday cards for all of us to sign each month to celebrate each other. We also have zoom connections, and planned events to talk. The student wellness group has developed our website, sends out monthly emails on mental health topics, and has gotten a grant to make a space in our building for a SMART lab. Another thing that has come out of this is faculty/student well-being time: Faculty can sign up with an idea to connect with students in a variety of ways. For example, we go for a walk (faculty and students together), or we eat lunch together, or have coffee and donuts (outside patio) when weather makes it possible. These little self-care role modeling adventures are fun and encourage conversations about things other than classes/school/points/etc.

- ❖ Adding connectors to our Dept meetings: Each month, a different faculty takes 5-10 mins to share what they are working on, and then to bring up a topic to discuss with the Dept. The “shares” range from professional to personal and allow us to get to know each other on a deeper level. Our discussions have ranged from scholarship, to divorce, to moral injury, and to following our joy/passions. I have worked here for 11 years, and I learn something new and admirable about a colleague with each of these short sessions. We also start our meetings with a mindful reset and/or a prayer.
- ❖ Adding mindful awareness to our curriculum, or meetings, and our lives.
- ❖ Take an environmental scan using the SAMHSA dimensions of wellbeing to self-assess where you feel you are in these dimensions vs. where you would like to be. Then, take the opportunity to prioritize one dimension to create a roadmap for change. Set a SMART but forgiving experiment (goal) for the next 60-90 days that you can then build upon and prioritize another area of wellbeing to target self-improvement aspirations.
- ❖ Set 1 major priority for the day the evening prior that relates to work and personal life each day so that you have 5 work and personal priorities to target each week. This will help you block the time needed in your calendar.
- ❖ Human Connections and Circle of 5 - Do you have a caring committee of trusted colleagues and friends to turn to during difficult times in life? A cheerleader, a challenger, comfort zone crusher, motivator, and safe space friend.

**Interview Question 2:** Studies show that across schools, due to increased workload and anxiety, many faculty and/or staff have reported a sense of never feeling like they’ve done enough. What kind of advice would you give a faculty member feeling this way?

- ❖ Examine what it means to do enough. What value judgments are being used to determine enough.
- ❖ The world is filled with unending needs from others. How do you prioritize and understand that continuously saying ‘yes’ results in saying no to other commitments made prior?
- ❖ Challenging what is enough and chasing perfection are struggles many professionals face. How do you determine what is enough and what can be acceptable? Examine the rate of return for additional efforts to help you preserve your finite energy.
- ❖ I post things on my door to encourage others to practice self-compassion. It changes monthly. This month it says: “I have enough, I do enough, I AM enough” so that everyone that walks by can remind themselves. We all have to find our peace with the workload, the ebb and flow, and the demanding nature of academia. I believe it is within ourselves. So many of us struggle with imposter syndrome and other internal dialogues that are negative. The inner critic does get us to higher levels of achievement, but it doesn’t need to be negative. For the faculty member feeling this way, I like to ask them to reflect on the positives and to pay attention to their internal narrative in order to explore how to flip the switch to positivity and self-compassion. Connection is another way to help: the more we are able to share our doubts and joys, the more we realize that our purpose together is a beautiful thing. Seeking out a mentor can be a wonderful way to talk through it all.
- ❖ Our words and thoughts have power. They have the power to change our mood and our mindset. Generating a positive thought in the morning can change your whole day. Consider setting an intention for your day. Setting an intention is more than passively thinking about a goal. It is a purposeful mental act to envision results and take aim, guiding our actions.

- ❖ Learn the art of saying no. I'm a big fan of saying Yes to the things you really love. That's the whole point of the Say No habit. Start by saying No to the obligations you've built up but don't really want to do. Make a list of all your commitments (really do it, it only takes 5 minutes) and mark the 4-5 that are most important. Say No to the rest and if it helps, recommend someone else to take up the invitation (pay it forward)!
- ❖ Find your Flow. Of all the things that can boost inner work life, the most important is making progress in meaningful work. In his seminal work, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Csikszentmihalyi outlines his theory that people are happiest when they are in a state of flow—a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. The idea of flow is identical to the feeling of being in the zone or in the groove or in your mojo. The flow state is an optimal state of intrinsic motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what they are doing. This is a feeling everyone has at times, characterized by a feeling of great absorption, engagement, fulfillment, and skill.

**Interview Question 3:** The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and brought significant stress to day-to-day lives. Many have noted that it also exacerbated existing mental health conditions among students due to campus closings that required adapting quickly to distance learning technologies and settings. As we move forward, can you offer a few suggestions on what faculty/staff should consider when interacting with pharmacy students?

- ❖ Outline standards for communications and sharing triggering information in the curriculum and strategies for how it is managed in the professional setting when it emerges.
- ❖ Align asking students for managing life balance with consideration for assignments, activities, class requirements, and exams across an entire semester – it is challenging for students to hear that we want them to observe life balance if we provide an extreme amount of activities and assignments.
- ❖ Start developing academic policies that allow for integration of technology to help make expectations explicit. Align policies with program core values in visible ways.
- ❖ Be kind and give the students and ourselves grace during this time. I was worried at first that students might take advantage of this if offered to freely. However, I found over this last year that students really appreciate it when we give the grace that the situation calls for. It has helped me to be closer to my students as now they are not afraid to share their truth. We all struggle at times, and we all need to reach out for help. Our OSA and Dean of student affairs are very student centered, and we have the support from that office to be an advocate for the student mental health. I am astounded at their resiliency through everything in this past year!
- ❖ Model the way of mindfulness practices- seek opportunities for stillness and mindfulness. These moments of quiet — to be in silence without distraction, to think deeply, to contemplate, to sort through things in our minds — help us to step back from all the things ricocheting around in our minds. It allows us to reset. In our constantly connected, multi-tasking, media-saturated society, we don't spend enough time in solitude, taking breaks, and being still.
- ❖ Introduce more play and laughter moments- laughter is associated with better sleep quality, increases circulation, boosts our immune system, reduces stress, and improves our memory and creativity. And laughter can mitigate depressive and anxiety related

symptoms. Try to tap into some laughter promoting sources and share this with your students.

- ❖ Talk about the power of neuroplasticity for students and forging new paths. Just like becoming physically fit, consistency is key. Build your mental muscle. The more you practice thinking realistically (but positively), the more you build new neuronal pathways and strengthening out ability for new learned behaviors.

**Interview Question 4:** It has been said that “Of all the things that can boost inner work life, the most important is making progress in meaningful work.” When we think about progress, we often imagine how good it feels to achieve a long-term goal or experience a major breakthrough. These big wins are great—but they are relatively rare. What are your thoughts on the ability of ‘small wins’ to boost inner work life?

- ❖ An old, but useful strategy with SMART goals, coupled with breaking long-term projects down to achievable milestones allowing more time for reflection and celebration of achievements.
- ❖ Avoid waiting for the major breakthroughs and frame the everyday and operational achievements. Celebrate the daily work needed to avoid challenges and develop consistency towards goals.
- ❖ Combine focus on results with focus on process and how the work gets done to help everyone also consider the journey, working with each other in civil and collegial ways, and what learning is happening along the journey toward project completion.
- ❖ HUGE! This is one of the basic ideas behind practicing gratitude: Being thankful for the little things daily gets you into a mindset to look for the good and celebrate living life on a daily basis instead of only when big things happen. Going back to my first answer on this survey, even the little thing like taking a 30 min walk with any students or other faculty that are willing and available has given me a gift in the middle of the workday – to celebrate and notice nature, to breath fresh air, to relish at being near the end of the semester face to face and healthy.
- ❖ Be aware of Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTS). Our thoughts are powerful. What we say to ourselves can influence not just our image of ourselves, but also the quality of our relationships and our lives. Stress is not the result of adverse external events but rather our adverse thoughts, predictions, and interpretations of external events. Resilient thinking starts with learning to separate our thoughts from the emotional and behavioral consequences of those thoughts. Once you reprogram your mind to exterminate ANTS and instead feed your mind with words of empowerment, you will experience less stress and worry and more happiness and joy.
- ❖ Apply Stoic Wisdom. For the stoics, wisdom is achieved by focusing your attention on what you can control and re-centering your efforts. Happiness is about the thoughts inside you, not the things that surround you. The wise person understands that happiness is not a destination, but a journey filled with positive thoughts and positive (virtuous) action. You can cultivate positive thoughts by forming healthy judgments about what "fortune" has bestowed on you and expressing gratitude for the gifts you have received. And positive action simply means doing your best to serve people within your sphere of influence. Success should not be defined by the final outcome. You cannot

control the outcome, only influence it. Doing your best, however, is always under your control and is the truest measure of success.

- ❖ The power of minor milestones. When we think about progress, we often imagine how good it feels to achieve a long-term goal or experience a major breakthrough. These big wins are great—but they are relatively rare. The good news is that even small wins can boost inner work life tremendously.

**Interview Question 5:** What do you see as the most important issues in faculty/staff health and wellbeing? What do you see as the most important tools/resources for faculty/staff health and wellbeing?

- ❖ Understanding underpinning value judgments that cement and heighten unhealthy thinking about work and achievement.
- ❖ Developing strategies to address these underpinning value judgements and connected thought/cognitive distortions.
- ❖ Self-advocacy in the academic education industry to ask for role clarity, role expectations, and future role / growth within the organization and the industry.
- ❖ Support, Training, Time Management. With time management, I mean that we need to support a culture that sets up respect and role modeling for us to NOT promote work-ism, and NOT give young faculty the idea that we need to accomplish/achieve in order to live our purpose.
- ❖ Tools/Resources: In order to change the culture of the school, there needs to be both faculty buy-in and TRUE administrative support. I find that these initiatives at most schools are happening when there is a faculty that is willing to take the time and energy to make it happen voluntarily. I hope that schools will come up with more support to have well-being committees/groups/initiatives that are just as supported as other faculty service to the school. I love the idea of an office of wellness/well-being that is behind the movement to support our cultures and students in mind, body, and spirit. My best example is how many of our schools now have an office of IPE in order to meet that need. With ACPE direction, I hope it will become more of a priority. Our students, faculty, and staff need mental health support just as much as intellectual support for success!
- ❖ Training – ALL faculty would benefit from more training in this area... which comes back to support to come up with the how/when/where to elevate all of our abilities and confidence.
- ❖ Having a growth mindset and active optimism, which can lead to improved health and happiness. Optimists are more likely to take action to care for their bodies and believe they can improve their health. Optimists attract and cultivate friends. And this thwarts feelings of loneliness. Moreover, the people in our lives are important resources available to us when tragedy strikes and, because they know us well, can point us toward helpful solutions when we need advice. Optimists are more likely to view the stress in their lives as energizing and when challenges become too difficult to manage, they are more likely to take action to relieve unhealthy levels of stress.
- ❖ The Power of habit formation and identity. James Clear, the author of atomic habits tells us, when choosing habits to cultivate, people often focus on WHAT they want to achieve. Clear argues this is problematic. To create habits that last, you need to focus on who you wish to become. Behind every system of action is a system of beliefs.

Consequently, any behavior that doesn't match your core self won't last. You can't change your habits if you haven't altered your underlying beliefs first. Thus, changing your habits means changing your identity. If you are proud of a certain aspect of your identity, you're more likely to build a system of habits around maintaining and developing it.

- ❖ Self-worth and mastery. All of us need to develop a sense of self-worth and mastery. We need believe we're worthy. The judgment of others, particularly the people most important to us, factor into our feelings of self-worth. When other people hold us in high regard and like us, our self-esteem is bolstered. Thus, it's important to develop positive relationships with people who enhance, rather than diminish, our self-esteem. In addition, we all need to feel that we are competent and able to contribute to the common good. Often this is through our work. Thus, mastery is another important aspect of our lives. If we are able to consistently achieve our goals, we feel more confident and competent ... and this creates success spirals.

It is our hope that at least one or two of these wisdom nuggets are helpful in your journey. You can also plan to visit our very own Work Life Journey website which includes stress management suggestions: <https://www.unthsc.edu/college-of-pharmacy/work-life-journey/identify-your-red-flags/managing-stress/>

We will continue to interview well-being experts in the coming months to share additional best practices. Keep in mind...

