

## How to support and promote trainees' well-being as an Educational Supervisor

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As well-being in postgraduate medical education becomes a more prominent issue, the role of the Educational Supervisor in this context has become more critical and complex. The GMC report in July 2021, addressing the impact of the pandemic on clinicians, stated that a third of trainees felt burnt out to a high or very high degree compared to a quarter in previous years. In addition, 44% felt that their work was emotionally exhausting to a high or very high degree. The impact of burnout and poor well-being is evident within the clinical workforce. Literature suggests that with effective well-being strategies, retention and recruitment of clinical staff can be optimised (Terregino et al., 2019). This guide aims to provide a holistic approach to help educational supervisor support trainees and will suggest practical well-being strategies.

### The important role of the educational supervisor

Trainees may find it difficult to approach supervisors to ask for help for various reasons. Fears about confidentiality, impact on the progression of training and fear of stigma may contribute. It is essential to acknowledge potential barriers that an educator may encounter to provide the proper support for a trainee. Time constraints, clinical constraints and work/life balance can contribute to an educational supervisor's availability. It is vital to recognise other characteristics which may impair the educator and trainee relationship, below are some examples of such barriers:

- Power Dynamics - The difference in the level of expertise may manifest as lack of approachability.
- Conflicting educational roles - Many clinicians hold multiple educational roles with conflicting aims, such as Educational Supervisor and Programme Director. Trainees may be fearful of impacting their training progression by seeking help for pastoral reasons.
- Time constraints - Clinical workload and other commitments may impact the ability to meet with trainees in a regular and timely manner.
- Lack of understanding of trainee's circumstances - An inability to empathise with a trainee's circumstances may prevent educators from recognising hardships. For example, lack of experience with maternity/caring roles.
- Personal prejudices - Despite best intentions, our own biases may impact our situational judgement.
- Emotional Labour - Educators may not have the emotional capacity to support a trainee due to their own personal circumstances.

It is important for educational supervisors to understand such barriers, as they have an important role in supporting trainees. Indeed, one of the most critical aspects of an Educational Supervisor's role is the ability to recognise a trainee in difficulty. It might not be immediately apparent, and signs of distress may present subtly, making recognition challenging. There may be

changes in clinical work or behaviour and attitude; being attuned to these changes can allow the educational supervisor to address and remedy issues before they escalate.

**Table 1** - Physical and behavioural signs which may reflect a trainee in difficulty

| Physical Signs           | Behavioural Signs       |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Weight loss/gain         | Frequent small errors   |
| Self-harm                | Frequent sick leave     |
| Poor personal hygiene    | Emotional Dysregulation |
| Self-neglect             | Avoidance               |
| Fatigue                  | Defensive behaviour     |
| Alcohol/Substance Misuse | Lack of productivity    |
| Agitation                | Constant cynicism       |
| Gastric problems         | Lack of concentration   |

### Wellbeing strategies to support trainees

There are many ways educators can support trainees to optimise their well-being. Promoting well-being strategies can demonstrate educators' commitment and care to their trainees' mental and physical wellness.

**Table 2** - Physical and Mental strategies supervisors could suggest to trainees

| Physical Strategies    | Mental Strategies     |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Regular exercise       | Mindfulness           |
| Sleep hygiene          | Mediation             |
| Diet                   | Cognitive Stimulation |
| Hydration              | Social activities     |
| Spending time outdoors | Unscheduled "Me" Time |

## Mindfulness

Evidence suggests that exercise has both mental and physical health benefits, including optimising cognitive function and decreasing the risk of anxiety and depression (Mandolesi et al., 2018). However, the extent to which one can engage in physical activity when feeling burnt out is largely dependent on their state of mind, mood and motivation. Practicing Mindfulness strategies may have a positive impact on this, as evidence suggests that mindfulness meditation has a useful impact on stress, depression and burnout in health-care setting and medical education (Chmielewski et al. 2021).

As shown in Table 3, the practice of mindfulness requires the following eight steps and as an educational supervisor you may wish to encourage your trainees to practice this. As a beginner, it is recommended to set up reminders for meditation and find time in a busy daily schedule. Changing the meditation routine after practising for a while is essential to refresh a person's enthusiasm. Finally, you should encourage trainees to be kind to themselves and the people around them.

**Table 3** - an introduction to mindfulness practice

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Take a seat                        | ➤ Find a quiet and calm place                                |
| Set a Time                         | ➤ Start with 3 – 5 minutes                                   |
| Notice your body                   | ➤ Find a comfortable posture                                 |
| Focus on breath                    | ➤ Follow your breath as it goes in and out                   |
| Bring your mind back               | ➤ Notice when your mind wanders and return it to your breath |
| Be kind to yourself                | ➤ When your mind wanders                                     |
| Challenge an intense thought       | ➤ If a thought is very intense, try to challenge it          |
| Finish your practice with kindness | ➤ Notice your emotions<br>➤ Notice the environment           |

## Reframe the narrative

A common theme that trainees raise is that time constraints due to clinical commitments and extra-curricular activities. A helpful strategy is to discuss reframing the idea of 'busy' and to look for short blocks of time where activities can be undertaken. Encourage trainees to take 10 minutes in the morning or evening to practice mindfulness and meditation. It is common for trainees to think that they are too busy or tired to fit in regular exercise. It can be helpful to explore strategies to fit in short bursts of exercise. Ideas including taking the stairs instead of the lift, parking further away from the hospital and walking the remainder of the distance or taking a team lunchtime walk can be helpful. It can also be useful to explore what exercise means to the individual, reminding trainees that all physical movement is beneficial to health and well-being. Household chores, gardening and playing games with children all count! The social side of exercise should not be underestimated. Suggest group walks, team sports or even a dance class.

## Summary

The role of the educational supervisor in supporting trainees well-being cannot be under estimated. This is because educational supervisors may be able to spot early signs of burn out and supporting and guiding trainees may help improve trainees wellbeing. There is a wide range of resources available that educators can use to support trainees, some of which were described in this How To. In addition, the professional support unit (PSU) in Deaneries is an invaluable resource that trainees can access independently or via referral. Canopi (2022) is a free service providing mental health support, which is available to all NHS and social care staff in Wales. The British Medical Association (BMA) also offer support services available for members and non-members.

### References and further reading

Canopi (2022) <https://canopi.nhs.wales/resources/> (Accessed 10th August 2022)  
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