

Working beyond the blues: the importance of doctors supporting the mental health of themselves and colleagues

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| [mental health](#), [Mental health for doctors](#), [ontheblogs](#), [Working & training in healthcare](#)

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It took a minor stroke before I was able to take much-needed leave from work. But it wasn't the stroke I needed to most recover from – it was the severe depression I had that was many times worse. The stroke afforded me the time and space I had wanted, and needed, in order to recover.

In 2013, I faced major stresses at work and my marriage was ending. It got the best of me. I had experienced moderate depression a few years prior – moderate enough that I could work through it – but this time was a lot more severe. I was so depressed and so stressed that I had suicidal thoughts. I confided in some people at work; I told them I was suicidal. I told them I wanted to take leave. But it was the [stroke symptoms](#) that allowed me to get the leave more easily approved. I took about a month off. As a result, I had to make the decision to step down as head of my department for a while.

Unsupportive culture for mental health issues

The culture of the health industry doesn't offer the best support for health professionals experiencing mental health issues. That was certainly my experience anyway. Some health professionals frown upon taking sick leave. There's a perception of weakness. *beyondblue* research actually confirms that perception from people in our industry.

According to a *beyondblue* survey of Australian doctors, approximately 40 per cent of doctors felt that medical professionals with a history of mental health disorders were perceived as less competent than their peers. Almost 59 per cent of doctors experiencing depression find it is embarrassing for them. Even more worryingly almost 50 per cent of doctors feel those with mental health disorders could face setbacks in their career progression.

Additionally, *beyondblue's* research showed that one in five medical students and one in 10 doctors had suicidal thoughts in the past year. It's not difficult to see the significant issue of the health industry dealing with, or in some ways failing to deal with, mental health issues. Though it's positive to learn from the research that doctors show great resilience, personally and professionally, to the negative impacts of mental health.

Recovering from mental health issues

My road to recovery was gradual. It took me a while to summon up the courage to see my GP. Instead of booking an appointment I used natural remedies, such as taking B vitamins, as a way of self-medicating. It made little difference. What I needed was counselling and medication: professional help.

Admitting to myself that I had a serious illness and seeking help was a major turning point. Part of my self-admission came after a long-time friend texted me saying 'I'm concerned about you', and provided me with the *beyondblue* Support Service number. Having a friend recognise and voice the seriousness of my situation also reinforced my need to seek help.

I finally called my GP. She took control and told me what we needed to do so I could start to recover. Following her advice and treatment plan was pivotal. A compassionate doctor will understand exactly what you're experiencing, as an individual and as an industry peer. Now I'm well and back working as a senior cardiologist at The Alfred and Peninsula Health.

High-pressure environment

I really feel for today's junior doctors. I think pressures on them have increased since I was in their position. The health system has changed, which has increased pressure to get more things done in less time.

There are also so many challenges that haven't changed: the pressure high achievers put on themselves to perform continuously at a high level; and the pressure to keep up with peers, whether it's managing high workloads or giving accurate diagnoses the first time, every time.

The stress of the high workload for junior doctors can't be ignored. You're working 50- to 60-hour weeks and then studying for 20 or more hours. Exam study adds to the intensity. You always have that uncertainty of passing, which everyone goes through.

Throw in the unsociable working hours, as well as job instability due to short contracts and frequent rotations, and it's easy to see the impact on young doctor's mental health.

Still, even when doctors aren't well, we often put our own health second. You tell yourself to always put patients first. But we need to fit our own oxygen mask first. If we don't look after ourselves, our patients won't have a doctor to look after them. A doctor needs to be well to provide high-class care to their patients.

Here is what I'd advise young doctors do to stay well

- **Look after yourself by doing what you can to develop work-life balance.** This could mean making extra effort to catch up with family and friends, establishing an end-of-day routine to unwind, or planning a holiday.
- **Develop interests and passions outside work.** I've taken up ocean swimming. What I love about swimming is the need for minimal equipment, getting time to myself so I can practice mindfulness, and I always feel great afterward.
- **Realise that you're more than a doctor, you're human.** Yes, we too can be ill, and we need to follow the advice we give our patients about self-care.
- If you're struggling, **seek help early.**

- **Make sure you have your own health professionals, especially a GP, that you trust and can be open with.**
- **If you see a colleague struggling, reach out to them.** Offer to catch up over coffee or just offer support. When hospital culture is positive, it can feel like you're working in a small town or community so you notice and react if someone isn't well. *beyondblue* has a range of resources to help you have these conversations.
- **Show leadership at work by not tolerating poor behaviour towards mental health issues.**

As a *beyondblue* speaker, I'm proud that our education and research tools have helped break down stigma surrounding mental health conditions. There are also other great resources such as '[Keeping Your Grass Greener: A wellbeing guide for medical students](#)'.

Talk to someone

I definitely encourage doctors who might be experiencing mental health issues to talk to someone. It might even be best to speak to a trustworthy friend outside of the workplace to ensure confidentiality. If you need to speak confidentially to a professional, your state Doctors Health Service and employee assistance programs can provide support. *beyondblue* has several confidential support options for doctors. The Support Service provides free impartial, solutions-focused counselling from mental health professionals by phone 24/7 on 1300 22 4636, online at www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support or via webchat from 3pm to midnight AEDT.

Sharing my experience of depression with other medical professionals has shown two sides of the industry. I have doctors approach me at conferences to thank me, and to share their own mental health issues. Unsurprisingly, they often tell me they haven't spoken to anyone else about their struggles. That in itself speaks volumes about the relationship between mental illness and our profession.

When senior executives from our industry attend and engage with my *beyondblue* advocacy talks - including Grand Rounds - that's when change and improvements most often happen. Support from the top is imperative. Leaders must walk the positive talk.

beyondblue provides organisations free practical information and resources about how to create mentally healthy workplaces. The [Heads Up](#) website is developed by *beyondblue* in collaboration with the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance. Heads Up has specific resources for doctors and medical students to support their mental health at work. To learn more, visit <http://www.headsup.org.au/doctors>

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