

# Wellbeing: Looking after yourself to look after others

Oct 13, 2020 | 0 

|     

| [challenges](#), [mental health](#), [Mental health for doctors](#), [onthepods](#), [work life balance](#), [work-life balance](#)...

Jules Willcocks interviews John Scott about the importance of wellbeing. They discuss wellbeing within the medical profession, how to identify burnout, as well as some methods junior doctors can utilise to thrive in the workplace.

**Summary Writer:** Theoni Haralabopoulos

**Script Writer:** Jules Willcocks

**Editor:** Jules Willcocks

**Interviewer:** Jules Willcocks

**Interviewee:** John Scott

## About Dr John Scott

John Scott is an Emergency Physician working on the central coast of New South Wales.

A naturally optimistic, outgoing and energetic person he was quite shocked to find himself [burnt out](#) and [depressed](#) at the end of his advanced training in Emergency Medicine. To overcome this unpleasant condition much research and soul searching has led to John's passion for [mindfulness](#) meditation, the field of positive psychology, the many benefits of regular exercise (crossfit and surfing) and other practices that lead to personal and institutional resilience, personal growth and movement towards our peak performance.

John runs a wellbeing program at Gosford Hospital Emergency Department and is currently undertaking a diploma in positive psychology and wellbeing.

## About Dr Jules Willcocks

Jules Willcocks is an Emergency Medicine Consultant and the Director of Prevocational Education and Training at [Gosford Hospital](#).

His interest is in bringing out the best in people principally through [mentoring](#) and coaching. He firmly believes that wellbeing is a crucial part of this and that you cannot look after someone to the best of your abilities if you yourself are not well.

He trained as an executive coach and has a particular interest in [financial wellness](#) for doctors.

He is married with two boys, which is why he's not living a degenerate life in Las Vegas and loves playing poker and fine single malt Islay whisky.

# Wellbeing: Looking after yourself to look after others

*Dr Jules Willcocks, an Emergency Physician and Director of Prevocational Training and Education at Gosford Hospital, interviews Dr John Scott, also an Emergency Physician at Gosford Hospital and the Director of Wellbeing at Gosford Emergency Department, New South Wales, Australia*

## Introduction

This podcast discusses the importance of wellbeing within the medical profession, how we can identify burnout, and offers methods to assist junior doctors to thrive within their workplace.

—

### Why do you think wellbeing is important in the medical profession?

- Wellbeing is important as it sustains our work and allows us to perform to the best of our capabilities. Most importantly, it is directly related to optimal patient care.
- Wellbeing implicates the utilisation of hospital resources, and therefore moves beyond the personal realm.

—

### You have been a consultant for a long time. For many years you have had to make critical decisions in patient care, and this can be physically and emotionally tiring. Can you give us your opinion of longevity within the medical profession?

- We are Emergency Physicians, a profession which requires a unique skill set and offers unique challenges. The appeal of the profession can simultaneously be a drawback, dependent on the perspective you take.
- Burnout does not occur suddenly, it is progressive. Therefore, if recognised, it can be reversed. For me, recognising that I was burnt out came as a surprise.
- I entered the healthcare setting in Australia optimistic and excited. In my spare time, I would surf. As I began advanced training, I acquired extra responsibilities, such as a mortgage, marriage, and children, all whilst preparing for my final exams.
- I eventually found myself coming to work with a knot in my stomach. I felt distant from my patients and colleagues. Sometimes I felt like crying and walking out. I was performing terribly. I found myself at the end of the day dreading going back to work the next day.
- At the time, burnout was an issue barely recognised, and therefore modes of addressing it did not exist. This completely changed once I recognised the issue, my outlook changed, and I began to respond.
- At the time when I found myself closer to that end of the spectrum where 'burnt out' was the final point, I encouraged myself to do something about it. I did not want to be that doctor who left the profession to pursue another career.

**You cannot look after a patient to best of your ability if you are not well in yourself. What do you think of that comment?**

- This is true, not only intuitively, but also is evidenced by the current literature.
- There are large companies investing in wellbeing because of the benefits to the productivity of the workforce, and these are companies notably distinct from the medical profession.
- There is a study from the Mayo Clinic advocating for physician wellness as it is a key quality indicator that drives patient care. It also minimises costs, as doctors less frequently call in sick or make errors.

**Your likelihood of making a medical error is increased if you are burnt out, as noted by the study you mentioned by the Mayo Clinic. Therefore, if you are not prioritising your wellbeing, you are doing a disservice to your patients. How can we recognise burnout?**

**Features of burnout encompass:**

- Emotional exhaustion.
- Depersonalisation. For example, labelling patients and viewing them as none other than their presentation, the 'chest pain in bed 5', or the 'geriatric patient with urosepsis'. If the connection between the doctor and the patient does not exist, the ability to gain a good history and decipher the differential diagnoses is difficult. The joy of the interaction is lost.
- Lack of personal accomplishment. For example, the outlook that your presence at work will make no difference to the turn-around of patients in the emergency department.
- Of course, at times we all feel elements of these features. It is when they become heightened that we start suffering.

**Burnout is more than just feeling physically tired. It is also emotional exhaustion. Junior doctors are more susceptible to burnout. Part of the reason may be because there is a sense of not being in control of their destiny. The challenges of exams and college requirements can make burnout more likely.**

- The study by the Mayo Clinic notes, the drivers from engagement and thriving to burnout include the sense of control and flexibility. A lack of autonomy can be an issue amongst junior doctors.

- I have known colleagues who take time off to physically rest, however, the same issues persist when they return to work as their mindset toward the constant challenges within the workplace don't change.



**It is your responsibility to be as well as you can be, however, this does not absolve organisational failure to provide a positive workplace. What is your approach to a colleague who is heading toward burnout?**

- Burnout is not only a result of personal actions, but also the culture you are working in. There is an equal responsibility by both the employee and the organisation to prioritise wellbeing.
- I can make suggestions which have been critical in helping me. For example, exercise, which has a multitude of benefits, and meditation, which allows me to feel more present, and has transformed my perspective working in a busy and dynamic emergency department. Meditation helps me to stay task-focused, and less distracted by interruptions.
- Practicing gratitude has also had positive benefits for me. Spending time, before going to bed or before driving home, to contemplate what went well that day.

**Jules Willcocks:**

The method of practicing gratitude is advice I give to incoming interns. At the end of the day, thinking of three things that you are grateful for, and even writing these down. This has a powerful impact and helps to reframe your reality. Studies demonstrate that practicing gratitude overtime changes your mindset and allows you to perceive your environment differently. It can therefore change your reality in a positive way.

The trading environment is similar to the medical profession in that it involves critical decision-making. There are large rates of burnout. Within the trading profession, it was discovered that employees were protected from burnout if they fulfilled these four aspects on a regular basis:

1. Something that made them happy.
2. Something that gave them connection (e.g. romantic/friendship).
3. Something that provided mental and or physical stimulation.
4. Something that provided fulfillment.

However, the issue is that these factors are what are compromised when you are busy. Therefore, if these are scheduled, it allows a greater likelihood of accomplishing them. For example, scheduling a tennis game with friends. This achieves both a sense of connection and physical stimulation.

I would also recommend visiting Dr Kristin Neff's website on self-compassion. There is a myriad of evidence linking a sense of wellbeing to greater levels of self-compassion and lower levels of self-compassion to increased levels of anxiety and depression. We must note that perfectionism in medicine does not exist, yet most of us identify with being perfectionists. Perfectionism can be self-isolating. If this is recognised, then the attempt to always be perfect can be subdued.

## Can you tell us of any other tips that help you?

- Social connection is important to a sense of wellbeing. When you are struggling, this can be an important time to bring your friends closer.
- It is important to communicate with your friends when you find your life is getting tough, and you may find that they have been in a similar situation and have found it equally difficult. You don't have to feel alone.
- We can liken our day to day activities to an imperfect game, and all we can do is try our best. Striving for perfectionism is destructive.

If you are unable to be kind and compassionate to yourself, then you are unable to be kind and compassionate to your patients and colleagues. Therefore, working on self-compassion will allow you to be a better doctor.

## A sense of purpose is also fundamental to wellbeing. What are your thoughts?

- There is a concept called the 20-80 rule. If you spend 20% of your time working on what has purpose or meaning for you, this assists with building resilience and preventing burnout.
- For example, working on being mindful for 20% of the time you treat the next patient.

## Related Podcasts

- [Compassion in medicine](#)
- [Self-care](#)

## Related Blogs

- [Setting your sights to thrive](#)
- [An alternative route to burnout](#)
- [The pressure of perfect in Medicine](#)
- [Creating mentally healthy work practices across large medical facilities](#)

**Tags:** #burnout,#doctor wellbeing,#emergency physician,#emotional exhaustion,#exercise,#gratitude,#junior doctors,#medical students,#meditation,#mindset,#patient care,#perfectionist,#productivity,#purpose,#self-compassion,#thrive,#wellbeing,#wellness,#work-life balance,#workplace culture,#workplace stress

