

what's working

building resilience
through mindfulness



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Everyday tasks can become so routine that we no longer even think about them—or, worse, our minds may instead race to worries, problems or negative emotions. Through mindfulness, people can learn to refocus on the task at hand and break the cycle of negativity.

From everyday reminders to on-site meditation sessions and smartphone apps, individual challenges and in-depth classes that all focus on mindfulness, employees at UMass Memorial Health Care have several opportunities to learn and practice techniques to help them regain focus on their present moment experience.

The Center for Mindfulness, which was founded in 1978 at the UMass Medical School, the academic partner of UMass Memorial, is credited with the modern-day concept of mindfulness. The relationship between the medical school and the hospital helped create the foundational awareness of mindfulness at the health care system, which has 13,000 employees in more than 75 locations throughout central Massachusetts. The practice of mindfulness at UMass Memorial received renewed focus with the launch of the wellness initiative and executive support of the practice, and it has become an important part of the system's efforts to target employee mental health and caregiver burnout.

"Since our launch in 2013, our wellness initiative has always had a foundation of mindfulness offerings," said Thomas Ward, wellness program manager. "However, the resources greatly expanded a couple of years into the program." In 2015, the organization's president and chief executive officer, Eric W. Dickson, M.D., renewed the emphasis on using mindfulness. He created a video talking about the importance of the practice of mindfulness and supported the launch of an effort specifically focused on mindfulness in medi-

cine, encouraging clinicians to use mindfulness for themselves and also with their patients. Following this effort, the system hosted screenings of *The Connection*, a movie about the science behind mindfulness and meditation, and offered Introduction to Mindfulness sessions, Mindfulness at Work courses and more for their employees.

"Mindfulness is about redirecting thoughts to the present moment in a nonjudgmental way," Ward explained. Practicing mindfulness can help health care workers whose thoughts may return to a past negative experience, such as a patient emergency, and dwell on it. "They end up getting stuck there, and this cycle of thinking can lead to depression. Sometimes people's minds race to the future, the next deadline, the next patient, what's going to happen in the next five years or 20 years. Their mind can get stuck there as well, where they can become very anxious," he noted.

As participants begin to learn the technique, mindfulness training focuses on helping them to be "OK with the fact that their mind is getting stuck and bring themselves back to the present moment to focus on the things that they can change," he said. "Just by breaking that cycle of thinking, that can be enough to help them feel relief—to know that they don't have to do that or be upset with themselves."

Employees at UMass Memorial Health Care can participate in mindfulness in a number of ways:

- **On-site and virtual meditation sessions.** Mindfulness champions who have received foundational mindfulness training lead the sessions, either by guiding the meditation or by using smartphone apps. The live virtual meditation sessions are archived on the wellness program information page and available for viewing by staff who can't attend the in-person sessions, work other shifts or want to

participate at home with family members. Generally at least one in-person or virtual meditation session is offered in one of the facilities every day.

- **Mindfulness smartphone apps.** The wellness program promotes several smartphone mindfulness apps that allow access to guided practice anywhere and on demand. These include apps that focus on mindfulness approaches to addressing anxiety, overeating and quitting smoking.
- **Mindful moments.** “Some of the departments have mentioned that they start meetings with a mindful minute before the meeting starts. The whole idea is to use these mini breaks over the course of the day as a break in the routine or to enhance focus on the meeting agenda rather than having the participants thinking about the last meeting or worrying about the next one,” Ward said. The hospital also bor-

rowed a campaign from another health care system reminding health care providers to take a mindful pause when they wash their hands. There are postcards displayed around the buildings with reminders of this practice, and the wellness program provides cards with instructions on other different meditations that conveniently fit in lab coat pockets. Managers also are encouraged to implement meditation and mindfulness in their work centers during huddles and other meetings.

- **After-code mindfulness pauses.** *Codes*, or emergencies in the hospital, can be a source of stress or anxiety for health care workers. Many departments have incorporated mindfulness practice as part of their after-action review, with sessions led by the managers of the department or incorporated into critical incident stress debriefings by the employee as-

sistance program (EAP) staff. “The thought is to go back and use mindfulness to go through the emotions, to notice yourself and to seek help if you need it in the moments afterward,” Ward explained.

- **Mindfulness challenges.** The wellness program’s online platform has a variety of mindfulness challenges throughout the year to encourage participants to continue their practice. Challenges range from encouraging staff to learn about mindfulness to tracking their mindfulness practice while doing everyday activities. For example, in one challenge, caregivers could earn participation points by completing a going-home checklist on three separate days each week. The checklist has three steps for caregivers to complete at the end of their workday to shift their mindset before going home. (See the sidebar.)
- **Mindfulness classes.** Employees are encouraged to enhance their practice by attending formal mindfulness classes. UMass Memorial has negotiated a 20% discount on mindfulness classes offered by the Center for Mindfulness, whose tuition is set on a sliding scale based on the participant’s income. Courses include the center’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes

Caregiver Going-Home Checklist

Caregivers at UMass Memorial Health Care can earn points by participating in various mindfulness challenges. One such challenge is the “Caregiver Going-Home Checklist,” which asks caregivers to complete the following steps on at least three separate days each week.

1. Take a moment to think about today: Acknowledge one thing that was difficult on shift—Let it go. Consider three things that went well.
2. Take a moment for a well-being check-in: Are you OK? Resources like our employee assistance program (EAP) are available to help. Check on your colleagues before you leave—Are they OK?
3. Now switch your attention to home: Think about something you are looking forward to when you get there. When you get home, focus your energy on rest and recharging.

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as well as their new Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy sessions. Realizing that not all employees can attend the center's classes, the wellness program also promotes a variety of other mindfulness training resources.

The issues of resilience and mental health have always been a concern for UMass Memorial and a focal point for the wellness initiative, based on employee mental health claims data and trends in the health care industry. Given the challenges of delivering health care, the mindfulness program has been a popular part of the wellness initiative, according to Ward. As an example, mindfulness-based activities consistently receive participation levels of 20-30% of those employees registered on the wellness platform.

"We're seeing active participation in a variety of activities over time. Instead of pushing out information, we're being requested to bring resources to our departments, especially around disconnecting from work, being able to sleep and managing stress," he said. "We've been invited to departments to talk about the resources that are available to em-

ployees to help them use mindfulness to mitigate the impacts of their day-to-day work on their personal lives."

Much of the focus recently in the health care industry has been on provider or caregiver burnout, and the same is true for UMass Memorial. "The organizational focus on burnout started picking up in the last couple of years between the data we were seeing in our physician/staff engagement survey results and our deployment of a new electronic medical record system in 2017," Ward said. In order to help employees continue to manage these challenges, UMass Memorial is planning to expand its mindfulness offerings in the future.

This expansion has recently started with moving the Center for Mindfulness under the umbrella of the health care system. This shift comes with "a renewed commitment by UMass Memorial Health Care to integrate mindfulness into our clinical and population health programs and more fully leverage the power of mindfulness to improve the lives of our patients, our caregivers and the communities we serve," as outlined in Dr. Dickson's announcement of the transition.