Accruing literature on burnout and physician wellness tells us that sustainable change must occur on three levels: individual, institutional, and within the broader culture of medicine. In this column we’ll narrow the focus to consider change on the individual level.

When assessing opportunities for personal change, it’s important to examine fundamental lifestyle choices. One approach is to imagine a circle with yourself in the center surrounded by basic lifestyle categories such as: nutrition, physical activity, sleep, social connections, sense of meaning and purpose, coping skills, and recreational activities. Each area carries weight, and all are interconnected. This model is based on the ‘Wheel of Life’ exercise used in coaching and is a useful tool for assessing one’s immediate situation (Whitworth 2007). I like this approach in physician wellness because it encourages a level of perspective and discernment that can identify both protective strengths and detrimental habits that may predispose to burnout. Ultimately each physician is their own expert on their own life.

I invite you to pause for a moment and take stock. Resting in the center of this circle, do you feel balanced? Would the wheel around you roll smoothly? Or do you feel unbalanced, with a lopsided wheel, strong in some areas but not in others, resulting in a bumpy and uneven roll? With the focus on your wellness, is there a lifestyle area that could benefit from your immediate attention?

One place to start might be your nutrition. How are you doing? Is the quality of your nutrition near the top, or bottom, of your priorities? Is there one small step you could initiate today or this week to improve your nutrition and gain a protective effect over time? Emerging research on the cardiovascular benefits of the Mediterranean diet and its positive effect on telomere lengthening emphasize the importance of day-to-day food choices (García-Calzón 2015). If you need a course correction, make a small change: an increase in weekly fruit and vegetable intake; a decrease in sweetened beverages; or the addition of olive oil as a primary dietary fat. You might also take time to consider your other forms of nourishment. For example the quality of your relationships, or the quality of your time spent online. What you allow in matters.

I encourage you to schedule time for yourself to metaphorically tap the brakes. Do it soon. Schedule an hour, an afternoon, a day, or a week, as you are able. Give yourself the time you need to breathe, reflect, and find your equilibrium. If your nutrition is in good shape, chose another area to explore. Conveniently, the benefits of behavior change are additive. Approaching fall as a time of self-renewal and preparation may help you craft a more skillful and resilient passage through the upcoming busy season. Finding a partner in change could add some fun. Modeling change in your office, department, or division could start a self-care revolution.

Take good care,

Hilary McClafferty, MD, FAAP
Chair, Section on Integrative Medicine