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How Are You, Really? - Nigel Girgrah, MD, Chief Wellness Officer



“**How are you?**” It’s a passing phrase we throw around so casually that the answer seems to come through on autopilot. “**I’m fine, how are you?**”

I imagine that years from now, many of us will look back on this time and say that things were difficult, but we managed, adapted... we were “fine.” We came to work, we showed up for our colleagues and patients, we took care of our families, and we got through it.

And to a degree, that may be true. In fact, that resiliency – our ability to step up and serve our patients and communities no matter the circumstances – is no doubt what makes us great healthcare professionals. It’s that selflessness that I witness and admire in my colleagues each day. No matter your role at Ochsner, there are people who depend on you to help them in their time of need.

Here in the Gulf South, our strength gets tested more than many as we battle everything from chronic health conditions to hurricane seasons that seem to intensify every year. **But sometimes the care we provide to others comes at the expense of our own mental and physical well-being.** Sometimes picking yourself up and dusting yourself off is easier said than done.

I’m reminded of that recently, as August represents a particularly difficult time of year for me. Every year around now I get into a bit of a “funk,” and I recognize the triggers. August is the month my son Bennett was born 20 years ago, and it’s around the time he passed away the following year. I think about him every day, but the weight of his absence hangs heavier on me this time of year.

This year has been a little worse for all the obvious reasons, including a pandemic that keeps us isolated from family and friends, polarizing political and racial tensions, and so much more. Before I knew it, I realized the effect of everything that’s been happening this year was bearing down on me. **After a colleague asked me how I was doing, I found myself answering a bit more honestly than my reflexes would normally allow, and surprise – the conversation helped.**

I share this personal experience not to ask for your sympathy, but because I know that I’m not alone. We all have our own unique stressors we balance alongside our day-to-day responsibilities of work, home and family. **We keep going because we have to, but we don’t have to do it alone.**

Many people are uncomfortable discussing mental health and well-being, especially when it’s personal. That’s definitely true among clinicians; unfortunately the medical profession has one of the highest risks of [death by suicide](#). In fact, what drew me to the work of provider well-being was attending my medical school reunion seven years ago and learning that two of my colleagues committed suicide. Burnout wasn’t as widely understood then as it is now.

To make matters more difficult, Louisiana is still one of 41 states that ask about mental health history on licensure applications for physicians. At other health systems, these questions can appear on credentialing and recredentialing paperwork. I know of too many outstanding professionals who have paused while answering this question, for fear of how their answer might be interpreted. Admittedly, even I gave pause while writing this message – if I were to state that I have sought counseling, would that have an impact on my career as a physician? These are the kinds of questions healthcare professionals ask themselves every day, although we shouldn’t have to.

As Ochsner's Chief Wellness Officer, I'm constantly thinking about ways Ochsner can help encourage the health and well-being of our providers and staff, whether there's a pandemic or not. Ochsner and my team at the Office of Professional Well-Being offer [several resources](#) to help support your physical, mental, social and financial health, and I encourage you to take advantage of them. You can also email my office at wellbeing@ochsner.org if you have questions or need additional support. **The more we talk openly about our struggles, the better it is for all of us.**

So, I ask you, how are you, really? You might be great, but if you're not, it's ok to admit that you're having a hard time. If there was ever a time we should start feeling safe admitting that, it's now.

Thank you for everything you do, and please – take care of yourself.

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