



REFERENCES

# Supporting yourself as a health-care student

As a health-care student (nursing, social work, pharmacy, medicine, personal support worker, dentistry, etc.), you may face a multitude of unique challenges and barriers throughout your post-secondary journey. Typically, you may see an increased presence of burnout, anxiety, sleep disturbances/insomnia, depression, psychological pressure, and an attachment to your cellphone (i.e., nomophobia).<sup>1-3</sup>

FOR FURTHER READING:



› For more information on tips and tricks to reduce the use of your cellphone and social media, check out our [infosheet here](#).

In recent years, there has been an increase in health-care workers reporting feelings of empathic strain, which is caused by exposure to occupational stress at a higher-than-normal intensity due to factors such as increased workload and decreased clinical autonomy. It results in physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as a decreased ability to empathize with those they are helping or who may be going through a difficult experience. For more information on empathic strain and protective factors, please visit CICMH's infosheet [here](#).

FOR FURTHER READING:



› For more information on how to create a healthy placement environment, check out our [infosheet here](#).

Another issue some health-care students must contend with is the ongoing shortage of nurses and family doctors in Ontario. Addressing the shortage is crucial, but it must be done in combination with offering support to students undergoing training and education before, during, and after program completion.

One of the ways the Ontario government is trying to address the nursing and family doctor shortage is through increased funding and expanded programs (click [here](#) and [here](#) for more information on this). However, many of these programs, such as the **Ontario Learn and Stay Grant**, have strict conditions students must abide by (e.g., requiring you to work in the area you studied for a certain amount of time) which can bring about external issues (financials, living situations, etc.).

The following section will provide you with recommendations on how to handle/cope with different situations you may find yourself in as a health-care student. Whether you're just starting your program, or you're in your last year, these tips can help you thrive as a health-care student and professional.



## Recommendations on how to...

### Cope with a code

Responding to a code is a foundational learning experience that pushes you to think critically under pressure, building your confidence for the next time you handle a code.<sup>4</sup> The adrenaline rush of experiencing a code can leave you exhausted afterwards and the emotions that come with any type of code can be overwhelming, traumatic, and can build-up feelings of self-doubt and anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

#### Recommendations:



#### ➔ Lean on your protective factors

- Social support (friends, family, colleagues, peers, supervisor)
- Recreational hobbies and/or activities (crafting, sports)
- Emotional regulation (acknowledge what you're feeling)
- Provide your body with the sleep, nutrition, and rest that it needs to reset and recharge.



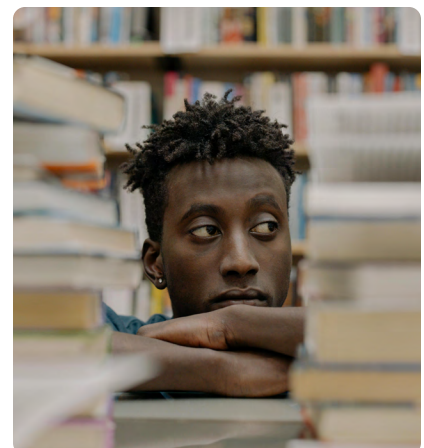
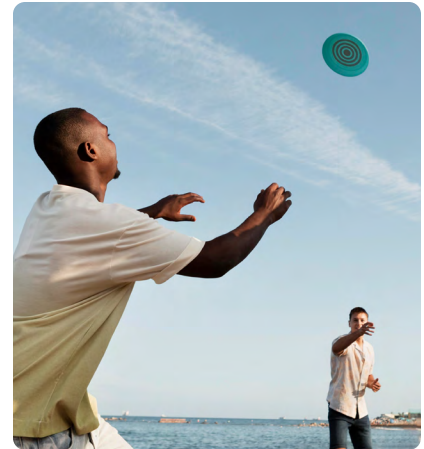
#### ➔ Engage in mindfulness exercises

- Journalling
- Breathing exercises
- Yoga
- Walking



#### ➔ Familiarize yourself with local crisis helplines (i.e., [988](#), [Good2Talk](#), [ConnexOntario](#))

- You may not be able to decompress right after a code and feel the complexities that came with it, it could be hours later. Make sure you're aware of the crisis lines in your area that are available if you need support. They can provide assistance and help you through your emotions.



## Handle the loss of a patient

The emotions that come with being in the health-care sector can be intense. Losing a patient can be emotionally challenging, and you may get stuck rethinking the situation in your head, wondering if you could have done anything differently.<sup>6</sup> It's normal to feel a sense of anger, loss, or frustration after losing a patient, and sometimes the outcomes are out of your control despite doing everything right.<sup>5</sup> You may also have to comfort a patient's loved ones while you are experiencing grief yourself. During these times, it's important to acknowledge your feelings and not ignore or push them away. Your job as a health-care professional is to provide compassionate care, no matter the outcome. It's important to remember that.

### Recommendations:

#### Lean on campus, community, and placement support services

- i.e., peer support, social support, professional support.

#### Take the time to develop effective coping strategies

- Acknowledge what you're feeling – normalize the emotional complexities that come with losing a patient, and remind yourself that there are many factors outside of your control.<sup>7</sup>
- Engage in debriefing sessions with your supervisor and/or colleagues who may be able to offer perspective on your experience and help you process it.
- Practice mindfulness or engage in hobbies (i.e., exercising, reading, watching movies).

#### You may find it beneficial to turn to spirituality to cope with the emotional distress you may be experiencing.

#### Consider setting boundaries to provide yourself with healthy space to protect and prioritize your own mental health. Recognize your limits and what you need to protect yourself from burnout

- You can learn more by checking out CICMH's boundaries infosheet [here](#).



#### FOR FURTHER READING:

- › For more information on mindfulness and meditation techniques, check out CICMH's webinar [here](#).

## Navigate ethical dilemmas

Identity-related dilemmas can arise in health-care placements where you must balance educational objectives and professional standards while you juggle being a learner and emerging professional.<sup>9</sup> This is often one of the hardest parts of being a health-care student and comes with the feeling of **moral residue**. Often, you feel powerless in placement settings due to the hierarchical structure of health care and can't support a patient in the way you want to or can, which makes it difficult to navigate complex situations.<sup>10</sup> Conflicts between what the patient wants versus what is good for the patient autonomy and beneficence often comes into play when dealing with medical situations, with the common sources of this conflict being a lack of communication, medical negligence, and unclear understanding of policies around family authority and psychiatric capacity.<sup>7</sup>

### Recommendations:



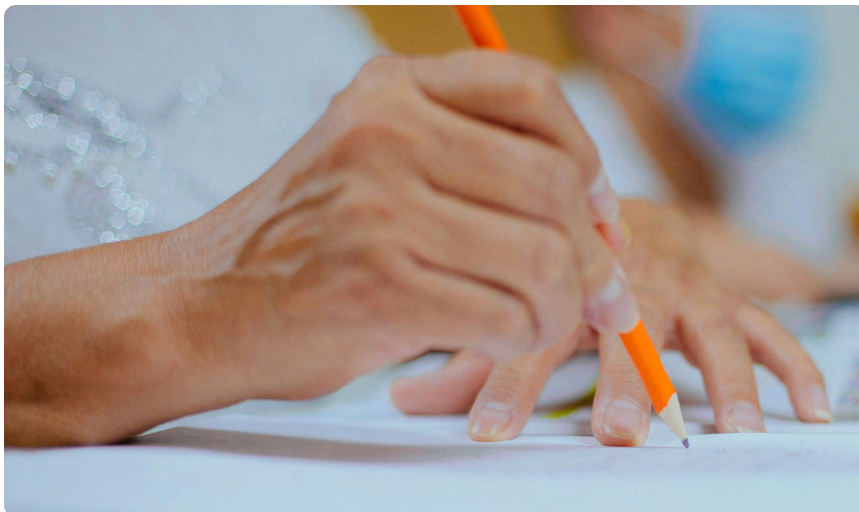
#### ➔ Lean on social and clinical supports

- This can be family, friends, or a clinical therapist. Having someone to talk to and work through your feelings towards a specific dilemma can be helpful.



#### ➔ Take the time to debrief

- This can be with your preceptor, colleagues or friends. Having that supportive space to debrief about situations and your emotions related to it can really improve your mental health and well-being.
- To further your understanding of your responsibilities and limits, consider taking some time to review appropriate policies, ethics codes and scope of practice.



## Manage overwhelming workloads

In a culture of self-sacrifice, it can be hard to prioritize your own well-being and have a healthy work-life balance.<sup>11</sup> Ineffectively balancing academic workloads, placement expectations and experiences, friends, family, and hobbies, can increase rates of anxiety, burnout, stress and depression.<sup>11</sup>

**FOR FURTHER READING:**



› To learn more about burnout and the 3 solution-focused steps to recover from it, check out CICMH's infosheet [here](#).

### Recommendations:



➔ Utilize institutional and placement support services



➔ Look into different time management techniques

- i.e., Pomodoro, Time Blocking, prioritization hierarchy



➔ Make time for self-compassionate activities

- i.e., adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise, partake in hobbies and interests



### Set boundaries



- Assess your available time and energy levels, get to know your limits and when you've reached them before burning out

### Lean on your support system



- This can be friends, family, peers, classmates, mentors, or supervisors

**FOR FURTHER READING:**



› To learn more about setting boundaries, check out CICMH's infosheet [here](#).

## Deal with imposter syndrome

It can be a lot of pressure to handle someone's life in your hands. The competitive nature of the field, rigorous studying, unrealistic self-standards, pressure to succeed and exposure to constant criticism are a few reasons that the health-care sector has one of the highest rates of imposter syndrome.<sup>12,13</sup>

Nursing and medical school give you a lot of information to learn, digest, and memorize, and sometimes it can be overwhelming, leading you to believe that you'll never know it all. It's important to remember that it is a lifetime of skills; you don't need to know everything from the get-go, you'll learn as you gain more experience.<sup>13</sup> It can be especially difficult to combat imposter syndrome if your preceptor is burnt out and does not have the capacity to teach you the necessary skills, or is only giving you smaller jobs (i.e., cleaning beds, helping patients to the washroom, taking their blood pressure), and not letting you put your skills to use.

Many students who experience imposter syndrome often suffer in silence because they are hesitant or embarrassed to speak up about what they're feeling.<sup>13</sup> Imposter syndrome is also linked to anxiety, depression, and poor mental health outcomes.<sup>12,13</sup>

### FOR FURTHER READING:



› To learn more about imposter syndrome, check out CICMH's [infosheet here](#).

### Recommendations:



#### ➔ Create a list of your strengths

- In moments where you question your place in health care, it can be beneficial to have a list of your strengths to refer to and remind yourself of your belonging in this field.



#### ➔ Practice positive affirmations

- Writing down, and referring to, short positive statements can help you overcome cognitive biases, negative thinking patterns and improve your well-being.
- Examples of positive affirmations could be:
  - I am doing my best
  - I am capable
  - I make a difference
  - I am proud of myself and the work I do
  - I provide compassionate care





➔ Shift from a performance to learning mindset

- Instead of adopting a performance mindset, which views failure as a sign of incompetence, try shifting to a learning mindset which views failure as a necessary stepping stone towards success and focuses on growth and skill development.



➔ Try talking to individuals who have been in the profession for a while as they may be able to offer realistic perspectives. While you may feel you are alone in feeling this way, imposter syndrome is common and is not a sign of incompetence.

## Discuss accommodations and schedule flexibility

Many health-care organizations have rigid schedules and rules that you must adhere to in your placement that don't accommodate other aspects of your schedule or needs (family commitments, jobs, health condition, disability, etc.). The unique demands of clinical environments can be hard to navigate and can reveal barriers that require immediate attention. Adjustments and accommodations should be seriously considered by both post-secondary institutions and placement organizations to promote academic success and inclusion.

FOR FURTHER READING:



➤ To learn more about imposter syndrome, check out CICMH's infosheet [here](#).



### WANT MORE INFORMATION?

To learn more about burnout and the three solution-focused steps to recover from it, check out CICMH's infosheet [here](#).

#### Recommendations:

##### Familiarize yourself with accessibility services



- At both your post-secondary institution and placement organization, get to know the accessibility services available to you.

##### Advocate for your own well-being



- You can express your concerns and work with the post-secondary institution and placement organization to make the necessary adjustments to help you succeed.

##### Openly communicate



- Be open about your specific needs and, if possible, proactively suggest workable strategies, schedules, and accommodations while also demonstrating flexibility and willingness to collaborate. Gather the appropriate documentation to support your request(s).

##### Know your rights



- Self-advocacy isn't always a quick process. Be persistent, keep records, and be clear and direct in the accommodation you are requesting. Contact your campus' disability services office to learn more about your rights and options.