

Millie Jackson

# Join me online

## Supporting faculty and staff wellness in the Age of Zoom

**A**t the beginning of March 2020, when everything in our world suddenly ground to a halt, I realized that we were not going to have an ordinary end to the semester. I did not imagine that we would still be in flux nearly a year later. Our faculty and staff were already heading for Spring Break when decisions were made to go online and to work from home. Over Spring Break, the administrative team prioritized creating the public facing messages and planned how we would continue to provide services to faculty and students in this unusual situation. These were the questions that libraries across the country were grappling with at the same time, and we were quickly learning from one another.

During that week my attention turned to how to address the concerns of faculty and staff who were suddenly being thrust into a new way of working. While a few had worked from home for limited periods and almost everyone was used to fielding a call or emails from home, this was a new environment. I think about the well-being and wellness of our faculty and staff quite a bit. In addition to being a librarian and the senior associate dean, I am a certified health education specialist and registered yoga teacher. Wellness is woven into my job duties, and it is part of our strategic plan initiatives. People are used to hearing me talk about health because I have sponsored wellness events over the past several years, including leading a regular restorative yoga class.

As I began to consider how I could offer support, I decided to keep it simple. There were a lot of messages and changes being thrown at people, and I didn't need to add more complication with an elaborate program. I turned to resources that I

had used in the past and thought about the elements of the Wellness Wheel, a well-known model for planning and delivering wellness programs.<sup>1</sup>

There are eight wellness components in this model: intellectual, emotional, occupational, environmental, financial, spiritual, physical, and social. I decided to keep the offerings simple with a weekly newsletter I call "Wellness Tips" and a weekly movement and writing practice called Release & Reflect. Aspects of each component have shown up in "Wellness Tips" over the past year. Release & Reflect is grounded in meditation, gentle movement, and expressive writing. The components that are most closely connected to Release & Reflect are from the emotional and spiritual dimensions.

Although we rarely address these dimensions of our well-being in the work environment, I sensed these were areas that needed the most support. I drew on my experience from other traumatic events, such as the 2011 tornado that devastated our town, where I had planned events or experiences to support faculty and staff as well as experiences from other aspects of my life.

### "Wellness Tips"

On the Tuesday after our Spring Break, I began sending out a weekly, short set of tips and reflections. I contemplated how often to send it but quickly determined once a week was enough, as long as I was consistent about the time of day I

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sent it. The tips are generally emailed before 10 a.m. every Monday. In the early weeks, I offered tips for time management, setting up a work-from-home space, and creating a ritual to begin the workday and end it. I also offered tips on adjusting exercise during the early days when we were all still inside and on keeping a journal or tracking some kind of change. The messages have contained a variety of tips over the months based on what I have observed, heard, and read. I've offered tips on brief meditations, ways to deal with the changes in seasons (as the pandemic continued longer than most people anticipated), staycations, poetry, and writing prompts. The most important message I feel that I have conveyed is to be kind to yourself and to one another during this time. Stress levels are high, and people have handled this in a variety of ways.

Erica Keswin writes about the importance of rituals at work in her recent book, *Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines into Workplace Magic*. She writes, "Rituals are purposeful. Rituals are personal."<sup>2</sup> Rituals can be anything from how you turn on the computer and set up your workspace to the coffee break you take at 10 a.m. everyday with colleagues. In early tips, I offered ways to shift the rituals we were used to in our face-to-face work with rituals that would aid success in the work-from-home environment. These included activities like setting up a workspace, powering down at the end of the day, setting up a virtual meeting or phone call with a colleague to talk while you have the cup of coffee, or talking while going for a walk.

I also offered time management tips such as the Pomodoro Method for setting a timer to get a task done and then taking a break after completing four tasks. I also encouraged getting up for breaks and moving, whether that was walking or doing the seven-minute workout<sup>3</sup> or some other physical activity. I was very aware from my own situation that sitting at the dining room table was not like sitting in my ergonomic office chair. I heard similar comments from faculty and staff.

As time wore on and summer approached, I continued to encourage faculty and staff to pause and take breaks. I offered articles about how to cope with canceling summer vacations or other plans they had made. I reminded them

about campus services that were available, such as classes through our Human Resources department, WellBama program, and the Employee Assistance Program. Into the Fall and Winter, I encouraged people to dance, laugh, and to create new rituals for the holidays. Each week only contains one or two tips, and they are offered as suggestions rather than a "one size fits all" solution. The goal is to provide ideas that the readers can adapt and be able to use.

## Release & Reflect

The other regular offering has been a weekly 30-minute session I called Release & Reflect. This practice is divided into 12-to-15 minutes of breath work and gentle yoga and 12-to-15 minutes of writing. The practice is grounded in narrative healing theory, one of the modalities I have training in. Movement combined with expressive writing can offer healing and self-compassion. Expressive writing, a practice where the author writes only for themselves, concentrates on deep feelings. The practice is based on the work of James W. Pennebaker and John F. Evans<sup>4</sup> and has proven that short periods of writing can aid in overcoming trauma, emotional upheavals, and can help improve health and well-being.

They state, "... expressive writing enhances emotional regulation, it can play a key role in brain and immune physiology." Further, their studies have shown that "writing helps people adjust to their situation better."

Expressive writing can also free what is called working memory, or the general ability to think about complex tasks. This allows more space to deal with complications we may be facing in our lives. Writing becomes more powerful when combined with gentle movement and breath work. Moving, breathing, and grounding often provide a greater sense of the self. The writer feels where things might be stuck and can address those areas or feelings.

Movement is often concentrated on relieving tension and stress in the neck, shoulders, jaw, and low back—all areas that become stressed and tired from sitting too long. Sitting and becoming aware of the breath allows us to "become more solid, more concentrated, and more intelligent."<sup>5</sup> These activities also allow us to be present and practice being grounded in our current situation.

The prompts have varied over the months with a constant option to write on whatever the author wants to. I have adapted some of Pennebaker's prompts from his book as well as from his COVID-19-related research, used story prompts to recall memories from childhood or times when we could move about more freely, and have used poetry as prompts.

Examples have included writing about what is essential for life in this moment, writing about people who have helped them, writing letters of gratitude, writing about their own resilience. Many of the prompts have focused on observing the environment they are working in or the environment around them. There have been prompts that provided suggestions for setting goals or thinking about goals. I have also used poems to spark writing ideas. The writing is personal and is not shared, though we occasionally talk about how a topic struck us before signing off. A core group has participated in these sessions since the beginning and say that the writing has helped them through the months of uncertainty.

### Partnerships and resources

Although I have a degree in health education and other training, I hope that the examples demonstrate that you don't need those to create a successful program. The Wheel of Wellness, mentioned at the beginning of the article, is a good place to begin for ideas. It covers a broad spectrum of areas that impact our lives. Discussions or activities can be created based on those areas. There are also resources to draw from on campuses. Wellness programs, counseling centers, faculty resource centers, human resources, and student life all have programs or professionals that you can connect with to offer programs or talk to about ideas. Draw on your faculty and staff members' expertise, as well.

Many of my ideas for tips and prompts have come from reading and being aware of the changes in the environment. I have also not been afraid to share my own practices and the ways I have tried to adjust to a very different year. I've asked questions and have received ideas from the faculty and staff who read the tips, in particular, that I have then offered back to the community.

### Benefits and conclusions

COVID-19 has changed our workplaces and our work experiences. Supporting additional dimensions of wellness has become vital during this time period. Based on feedback I have received from faculty and staff, both practices have been helpful throughout this past year. Some have taken time to pause more, start a journaling practice, pick up a neglected musical instrument, or found an alternative way to exercise when gyms have been closed or limited. Those who have joined the weekly movement and writing sessions have said the consistent practice has helped re-establish journaling habits. While these offerings were born from a need from the drastic change in our environments, they are not only practices for this time period. These practices demonstrate that wellness programs do not have to be costly or elaborate to support well-being.

As I think ahead to Fall and the hope of returning to in-person activities, I have been thinking about how these programs will continue and evolve. While they may not look exactly the same, I think that the reminders about well-being, taking time to pause, and appreciating the small things will remain important. The virtual programs may shift to in-person or remain virtual, if they continue. The Zoom space is a safe container that is easy to access and can allow for broader participation. What I do know is that supporting the wellness of all faculty and staff has become a greater part of the library and that is worth continuing.

### Notes

1. The Six Dimensions of Wellness, National Wellness Institute, 2020, <https://nationalwellness.org/resources/six-dimensions-of-wellness/>.
2. Erica Keswin, *Rituals Roadmap: The Human Way to Transform Everyday Routines into Workplace Magic* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2021).
3. The Scientific 7 minute workout, <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/09/the-scientific-7-minute-workout/>.
4. James W. Pennebaker and John F. Evans, *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal* (Enumclaw, WA: Idyll Arbor, Inc., 2014): 9, 11.
5. Thich Nhat Han, *Making Space: Creating a Home Meditation Practice* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2012): 15. 