

June 30, 2020

Dear Students,

As a result of this world wide pandemic, we are still navigating stages of uncertainty and working to develop wellness activities to enhance your experience for the coming academic year. As we face our new reality, the sense of being challenged during this time has been nearly universal. The ability to handle uncertainty and remain focused is one of the most critical life skills one can learn. We will all practice that together. As we move forward, there are just a few key points we want to share.

First and foremost: the Office of Student Affairs is here for you! If you have any questions or concerns that you would like for us to be aware of, please contact Ms. Jordan Flynn, Director of Student Support and Wellness at Flynnjo@musc.edu or Dr. Myra Haney Singleton, Associate Dean for Student Affairs and Student Wellness at haneymk@musc.edu

We know that some are challenged with coping with the illness or a loss of loved one due to COVID-19. Our hearts are with you, and with all who are facing the tragic consequences of this pandemic. We also acknowledge the pain of the reality that many are facing due to the insurmountable issues related to racial injustices, the lynching of George Floyd and others whose lives were tragically taken away. Our campus community stand ready to support you. We hope that you will do the same for one another, and that the bonds you have formed at MUSC will sustain you amid these circumstances and long after you leave.

Currently, the Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Office of Student Programs and Student Diversity are hosting a phenomenal six-week series of virtual events focusing on diversity and self-care. Next week's session is titled CODE BLACK: The Differential Impact of COVID-19 on Black and Brown Communities and will be held on Tuesday, July 7 from 5:30-6:45pm. You can [register here](#) for it.

With the rise of the rate of COVID infections, we are grateful that many are choosing to behave responsibly during this crisis and act as leaders and role models in your families and communities. We would like to thank you for that.

In closing, we are sharing an article, *Prioritizing Wellness in the Whirlwind of COVID-19*, which was written by a fourth year medical student at David Geffen School of Medicine. We hope you will find it to be helpful and uplifting.

Prioritizing Wellness in the Whirlwind of COVID-19

In the midst of COVID-19, our communities have been stricken with a virus that has changed the landscape for how we live, work, think, and communicate. These are precarious times, and for many, it is difficult to remain grounded with a rapidly shifting environment. As our "new normal" continues to unfold, many of us may feel afraid, worried, or powerless.

Personally, the COVID-19 experience has caused me anxiety. I worry about the health of my family and friends, the safety of my colleagues on the frontlines, the overwhelming changes in medical education, and the future of our society. Over the past month, I have spent many hours searching, scrolling and reacting to global health updates. I questioned whether I processed too much from the media and invested too little in supporting others.

In addition to shared frustrations of social distancing, mask wearing, and public health hysteria, we—as medical students—are greatly impacted by the swift changes in medical education and health care. Our traditional learning environments and clinical rotations have become virtual lectures and online simulations. Our exams are postponed, research halted, and conferences, celebrations, and graduation are cancelled.

Despite being overwhelmed with these changes, we remain committed to our coursework and our communities. Many of us welcome the opportunities for community building, self-development, and recovery. We ask ourselves: Who needs my help most? Can I volunteer? How many study questions can I tackle? Should I start a scholarly

project? Is it safe to rest and recover? As a future physician, what can I learn from this experience? While in the midst of uncertainty, medical students continue to search for balance between scholarship, service, and becoming our best selves.

Amidst a whirlwind of expectations, politics, news, and social media challenges, I encourage you take a deep breath and reflect on what YOU need most. During this season, I have prioritized my physical and mental wellbeing. I have learned to be more patient with myself and to give myself grace. Consider utilizing these reflective questions to develop your own personalized wellness routine:

What am I grateful for?

I begin each day with a reflection on gratefulness and intention. I reflect on the things I'm most grateful for—food and shelter, education, supportive family and friends, and so much more! I use these moments to limit negative attitudes and behaviors and maintain a space that is encouraging and motivational. I believe positive reinforcement will help to see us through this time. It's important to continue to encourage yourself now and in future years as a physician.

Who am I connecting with?

During this time, it's about social distancing, not social isolation. I try to do small things with great love—offer support and empathy for my loved ones. I stay connected with phone calls and video chats. Spiritually, I find peace in knowing that strength, hope and resilience will come out of this season.

How am I energizing my mind and body?

Studies have shown that moderate-intensity exercise for about 30 minutes a day provides health benefits. I prioritize eating healthy, staying hydrated and getting about 7 hours of sleep because it can help build the immune system. Moving the body also helps to reduce stress and anxiety. Sometimes, a brisk walk or jog can clear the mind. I like to stretch my muscles with an online workout or yoga session.

After a workout, I dedicate 15 minutes to deep breathing in order to cultivate mindfulness—there are various streaming services and phone applications available if this is uncharted territory for you. When it's time for a wind-down, I often incorporate my skin-care routine and a hot cup of tea while reviewing flashcards.

What am I letting go of?

At the end of the day, negative thoughts may start to accumulate. While the body has a natural response to stress, there are many ways to stay calm and support positive emotions. While adjusting to this "new normal," I try to release feelings of anxiety and frustration and embrace each day with a calm mind.

What can I create or cultivate during this season?

At this time, it's natural to feel helpless and isolated. During times like these, I try to utilize this opportunity to get creative and increase my feel-good activities! I might create a project or cook a new dish. This could also be an opportune time to invest in the future by applying to scholarships, writing a journal review or finishing a writing project! Lately, I've heard of students assisting in the fight against COVID-19. For example, a few of my colleagues have created a student-run organization to help with grocery shopping, childcare, pet sitting and other essential needs for our local healthcare workers. This is a special opportunity to reignite our unique talents and contribute to the world around us.

How can I remain present?

I try to be engaged in each moment, remain curious and welcome new ways of understanding by staying informed. It's important to be flexible and to give myself the time and space I need to reassess and recharge daily.

I enjoy reflecting on these questions, and I encourage you to do the same for your personalized wellness ritual. Maintaining routines can help to keep us positive and resourceful. I hope that others can also find peace in knowing that this is a transition and that we are not alone in this journey. These challenging times will make us stronger, bolder, and resilient future physicians!

About Varina Clark

Varina Clark is a rising fourth year medical student at the David Geffen School of Medicine (DGSOM) at UCLA. She pursued her Sc.B. degree in Human Biology at Brown University.

Prior to starting medical school, Varina was a Clinical Research Supervisor at Memorial Sloan Kettering, and she spearheaded health education initiatives at the Montefiore Family Health Center in the Bronx, NY. Varina is committed to addressing health disparities and providing culturally responsive, comprehensive healthcare to patients. She is also passionate about diversity initiatives and programming within medical education, and she established the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Representatives position on the Medical Student Council (MSC) at her school. Currently, she serves on the UCLA EDI Student Advisory Board and is overseeing initiatives on both undergraduate and graduate levels.

In 2019, Varina was inducted into the Gold Humanism Honor Society, where she was recognized for her compassion and commitment to patient care. As a future physician-leader, her goal is to take an active role in addressing health disparities, improving health outcomes, advocating for underserved communities and mentoring the next generation of physicians.