

Amid the breathless?

Remember to breathe

Brendon Evans

Most adults breathe too often but do not breathe enough.

– Emily M Bishop¹

General practitioners (GPs) are immersed in the breathing of others. This may seem like a strange statement, but it is nevertheless true. We consult with coughing children. We help the hyperventilating. We support those sighing with exhaustion, depression and grief. We are surrounded by problems that are manifested – at least in part – by respiratory symptoms.

Life as a GP is full and busy. Nowhere else in my personal career pathway have I felt as industrious (when running on time) or as harried (when running late). With an entire day split into short segments measured in minutes, it is easy to be swept along with the current of complaints and weighed down with the bulk of others' burdens. This pressure could lead the unguarded practitioner to their breaking point.

It is well known that the stressors of medical work can lead to burnout, and GPs are not an exception.²⁻⁵ When we begin to feel suffocated or strangled with the loads of others – including their wheezes, rattles and secretions – it is important at that critical time to prompt ourselves: remember to breathe.

Breathing – or self-care – is different for every doctor. Once I had a supervisor who would lie down on his examination couch and listen to music every lunchbreak. Some GPs schedule time to leave the

building for exercise. For many their self-care is scheduled time for enjoyment with their friends and family. Ideally, each individual knows best what actions will result in the calm and peaceful breathing they need to support their mental and emotional reserves required to enable them to serve their community. However, sometimes the challenge can outstrip their ability. If additional support is required, resources and assistance can be found from The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners⁶ and other organisations.^{7,8}

From the first cry of the neonate to the Cheyne–Stokes of the palliative and everything in between, GPs continue to serve the needs of Australian patients in challenging times and environments. We do this best when we proactively maintain our own physical, mental and emotional health. Remember to breathe.

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