



## **This document provides details of resources and services, specifically developed for general practitioners and health professionals, relating to self-care and mental health wellbeing.**

General practice is a rewarding and fulfilling career contributing to improving the lives of many people across Australia. However, by its very nature, this work can be challenging and stressful.

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) recognises this can contribute to high rates of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems among doctors.<sup>1</sup> Burnout is a common experience reported by medical professionals throughout the career span.<sup>1</sup> Multiple barriers, such as perceived stigma, professional integrity and concerns regarding potential career implications, result in poor uptake of mental health services.<sup>1, 2</sup>

Self-care and mental health are critical for ensuring overall health and wellbeing for general practitioners (GPs). Proactively managing physical and mental health promotes the development of more effective and sustainable work environments and a healthy work–life balance.

### **What is self-care?**

Self-care is about ensuring you look after yourself without becoming your own doctor, and includes looking after your physical, mental, emotional and social health. Self-care is both a preventative and therapeutic action. Self-care is:

- recognising your limits, setting boundaries, establishing and working towards achieving goals and maintaining a work–life balance
- implementing strategies to provide care and compassion to yourself
- setting up the foundation for positive mental and physical health
- accessing support as required
- undertaking deliberate, self-initiated activity to take care and control of your own wellbeing.

## Self-care strategies to support mental health wellbeing

### Self-care strategies include:

- ✓ not taking work home, where possible
- ✓ scheduling regular breaks
- ✓ being realistic with time and avoiding overcommitting
- ✓ developing and maintaining healthy therapeutic boundaries
- ✓ debriefing with colleagues regularly
- ✓ demanding a good work–life balance (and not seeing this as a sign of weakness)
- ✓ maintaining a healthy, balanced diet
- ✓ scheduling regular physical activity
- ✓ practising good sleep habits
- ✓ practising mindfulness
- ✓ participating in activities that bring personal joy
- ✓ making your relationships a priority and enjoying time with family and friends
- ✓ maintaining connection with culture, country and community
- ✓ establishing a relationship with an independent GP to assist you to manage your own health.

## Do you have your own GP?

The RACGP strongly recommends all GPs seek out a regular GP who can provide ongoing independent and objective professional medical advice and work with you to manage your physical, mental and emotional health.<sup>3</sup> Taking care of your own health will ultimately better equip you to safely provide care for others.

The RACGP acknowledges many GPs work in areas of isolation and face additional challenges in accessing independent medical and psychological services. Telehealth consultations may provide a solution. Telehealth-capable GPs are searchable via the [National Health Services Directory](#). The [Better Access initiative](#) has expanded to include Medicare items allowing those living in eligible rural and remote locations to access an agreed number of psychological consultations via telehealth video conferencing.

## Where to get help for yourself

### → RACGP GP Support Program

The [RACGP GP Support Program](#) offers free, confidential specialist advice to help cope with professional and personal stressors impacting areas such as mental health and wellbeing, work performance and personal relationships. The service is available to all RACGP members who are registered medical practitioners at locations across Australia, including in regional and remote areas. Clinicians are Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA) registered psychologists and Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) registered social workers with at least three years' clinical experience. This service is delivered by Optum Health & Technology (Australia). Appointments for face-to-face or telephone counselling during business hours can be made by calling 1300 361 008 (office hours 8.30 am – 6.00 pm, Monday to Friday) and via the same number for 24-hour/7-day-a-week crisis counselling.

### → Doctors' Health Advisory Service

Resources and articles relating to wellbeing, illness prevention and recognising and managing mental health illness for medical professionals are available through each state or territory Doctors' Health Advisory Service (DHAS). Each state or territory DHAS operates a telephone help line providing personal advice to practitioners facing difficulties.

Australian Capital Territory	02 9437 6552
New South Wales	02 9437 6552
Northern Territory	08 8366 0250
Queensland	07 3833 4352
South Australia	08 8366 0250
Tasmania	03 9495 6011
Victoria	03 9495 6011
Western Australia	08 9321 3098

Further details for each DHAS are available via the [Australasian Doctors' Health Network](#).

### → CRANaplus Bush Support Services

[CRANaplus' Bush Support Services](#) provides a free and confidential 24-hour/7-day-a-week telephone counselling service for rural and remote health practitioners. The service is staffed by psychologists, including two Aboriginal psychologists. CRANaplus membership is not required to access the service. Phone 1800 805 391.

### → Lifeline

[Lifeline](#) provides all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. Phone 13 11 14.

### → beyondblue

[beyondblue's support service](#) is available 24 hours /7 days a week by phoning 1300 22 4636 or via webchat 3.00 pm – 12.00 am/7 days a week.

## Developing and supporting mentally healthy GP communities

'In a mentally healthy workplace people at all levels have a shared vision of, and commitment to, positive mental health. Work demands are realistic in a way that balances the needs of the staff and the employer and do not pose an unreasonable risk to the mental health of individuals. Everyone in the workplace feels comfortable to speak openly about mental health and mental health conditions, without fear of stigma or discrimination. This creates a culture of respect and inclusivity.'<sup>4</sup>

### → beyondblue Health Services Program

The aim of the [beyondblue Health Services Program](#) is to address the prevalence of anxiety, depression and suicide in staff working in health services across Australia. beyondblue has developed a practical [how-to guide](#) for health services to develop and implement a tailored mental health and wellbeing strategy to support their staff.

### → In-practice group supervision

General practices may consider establishing a model of group supervision, facilitated by a non-medical professional with experience in counselling and mental health, such as a psychologist or mental health social worker. A *BMJ* article provides an example of [implementing group supervision in general practice](#).

## Further resources

### → Organisations/agencies

- The [RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health](#) faculty and the [Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association](#) provide support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors
- [Rural Workforce Agencies](#) provide personal and family support for health professionals in rural and remote communities, including orientation programs for new recruits and GP locum relief programs that help prevent burnout

### → Courses/participation

- Doctors health courses are searchable via the [RACGP website](#) and are available via face-to-face, e-learning and blended models
- [CRANApplus](#) provides education, including courses in self-care and resilience, for rural and remote health practitioners
- Balint groups, coordinated by the [Balint Society of Australian and New Zealand](#), are experiential, small group educational activities in which healthcare professionals discuss cases from their practices with a focus on the clinician–patient relationship. One aim of Balint groups is to develop mutual support between health practitioners by sharing experiences, feelings and details of the more challenging situations in clinical practice.
- [Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance](#) is a free four-week online course developed by Monash University
- [The Blue Knot Foundation](#) provides training on burn out, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma

### → Reading material

- Rowe L, Kidd M. *First do no harm: Being a resilient doctor in the 21st century*. London: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015.
- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, *Keeping the doctor alive: A self care guidebook for medical practitioners*. South Melbourne, Victoria: RACGP, 2006.

- Kearns H, Gardiner M. *The ultimate time management guide for GPs (and in fact anyone in general practice)*. South Plymouth, SA: ThinkWell, 2008.
- Stevenson A, Phillips C, Anderson K. Resilience among doctors who work in challenging areas: A qualitative study. *Br J Gen Pract* 2011;61(588):e404–10.
- Centre for Clinical Interventions, [Building Self-Compassion](#) resource

### → Digital mental health resources

- Informal online support networks on social media platforms host open and closed forums allowing GPs to connect with other practitioners, providing mutual support, understanding and resource sharing
- [Head to Health](#) is an Australian Government, Department of Health repository for online mental health resources, including mental health apps

## References

- 1 beyondblue. National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students. Hawthorn, Vic: beyondblue, 2013. Available at <http://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/1132> [Accessed 8 February 2018].
- 2 Elliott L, Tan J, Norris S. The mental health of doctors: A systematic literature review. Hawthorn, Vic: beyondblue, 2010. Available at <http://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/0823> [Accessed 8 February 2018].
- 3 The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. Curriculum for Australian General Practice: DH16 – Doctors' health contextual unit. East Melbourne, Vic: RACGP, 2016. Available at [www.racgp.org.au/Education/Curriculum/Doctors%E2%80%99-health](http://www.racgp.org.au/Education/Curriculum/Doctors%E2%80%99-health) [Accessed 8 February 2018].
- 4 beyondblue. Developing a workplace mental health strategy: A how-to guide for health services. Hawthorn, Vic: beyondblue, 2017. Available at <http://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/1728> [Accessed 8 February 2018].

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