

Case Study: St George's, University of London, Department of Paramedic Science

Embedding work-life balance in day-to-day work

Paramedics are often seen as 'indestructible heroes', prepared for anything, at any time, in anyone's hour of need. The reality is that paramedics are not superhuman, and they experience the same challenges in life – money worries, personal relationship difficulties and health concerns – like everyone else. But added to this are gruelling shifts, emotionally charged situations, assaults, and high levels of operational demand.

Student paramedics can also face other pressures that may impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Academic study, financial pressures, moving away from home, lost social circles, and development of clinical confidence can all be challenging.

As such, it is vital to understand that paramedics may have their own unique vulnerabilities, but also their own unique identities, ones that transcend being a paramedic alone. This recognition forms part of our approach in supporting students to identify tools and strategies that help them to stay mentally and emotionally well.

The Department of Paramedic Science actively encourages our paramedic students to focus on maintaining a positive work-life balance and promotes ways of doing so. Recognising that, in order for students to develop resilience and maintain positive mental health and wellbeing, they must be equipped with the time and space to recharge, connect and do the things that bring them joy outside of the ambulance and academic world. It is crucial that they do not feel guilty for doing so, but rather view this as a vital aspect of being a healthcare professional. This will help them to maintain their own wellbeing and help to build longevity in their ability to care for others.

At the heart of our approach is our peer support initiative with our student paramedic Blue Light Champions. This group of dedicated third-year students support and encourage their peers to engage in self-care and nurture other aspects of their identities. They do this in a number of ways, including through advocacy, social media and activities, as well as wellbeing walks, coffee mornings and pub quizzes. They also run a podcast where they discuss maintaining a positive balance between work, personal life and study. Our hope is that by encouraging and empowering students to have open conversations about, and seek support for, their mental health, they will feel more confident to do the same throughout their careers, improving organisational culture in the process.

For the faculty, seeing our students as individuals, and understanding their holistic needs is essential to developing a compassionate culture that supports students to achieve their aspiration of becoming a healthcare professional. Equally important, this approach incorporates celebrating other aspects of their lives and creates an environment that permits vulnerability, openness and seeking support when students aren't at their best. We want to enable students to develop resilience-building tools to help them manage their studies, as well as the challenges they'll face as a paramedic. But we also want them to recognise that their health remains the number one priority, which is too often overlooked.

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