

Understanding & Supporting Your Medical Student: staying connected[©]



By
Indiana University School of Medicine Students
&
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Family Orientation
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School of Medicine



Counseling Services & Wellness

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General information for parents and family

"All we can think about is med school."

- Medical school is one of the most difficult challenges one could undertake. Your loved one will question the decision many times, especially during the first semester.
- Most of your loved one's classmates were at the top of their undergraduate classes and accustomed to earning A's without giving up weekends to study in college. This will likely change (at least when there is an exam week). These changes may be difficult at first, but with your support and by maintaining a long-term focus it is manageable and even enjoyable.

"Let them know it is fine to not be the top student in the class anymore."

- You are their cheerleaders. Keep reminding your student that they are intelligent and amazing individuals, because sometimes in medical school they just think that they are so 'average'."
- The grading scale at the IUSM is challenging: the top 10% of a class gets Honors, the next 10% of the class gets High Pass, and the remaining 80% of the class gets a Pass. For many, it's hard to tolerate being "average," even though 80% of their classmates are right there as well.
- There will be fewer trips home. Your loved one wants to, but for the time being family must come second. Do not take it personally. You will be missed. They want to be included. Invite them to family events and such, but make it clear that it's OK if they can't come.
- Time goes by without notice, tests loom, and when the words "I'm busy" are spoken... it's probably the truth.

"The best things family can do are: listen, be understanding, supportive and encouraging."

- Be prepared for many phone calls with crying and complaining. Just listen, encourage and support.
- Talk early about expectations and commitments that are important.
- Try not to sweat the small stuff. If there is a problem, try to talk openly about it.
- Realize most lessons learned in med school have to be figured out by the individual and that process can either occur the easy way or the hard way (usually a mix of both), neither of which should be considered "bad" things.
- Med school can be very difficult at times, and relationships can be stretched thin. The more understanding everyone is, the better.
- Ask questions about their day. Ask what they learned today. Ask what their classes are like.

"Don't give us a hard time when we have to cancel something."

- If your student wants to balance med school with other personal strides, let them do what they feel comfortable with. They will be much happier and much more successful if they feel these upcoming years are part of life rather than a sacrifice of life.
- You don't have to fix your student's complaints or problems. Ask them what they think their options are and how they can work through it. Try to limit advice unless requested.



Stress and Mood

"Med school can be an emotional rollercoaster, and it's good to be aware of that beforehand."

"It is important to do well in school, but balance is the key to not getting burned out."

- Students get tired, irritated, anxious and possibly even depressed.
- Counseling is available. Call 317-278-4750 or visit the website <http://counseling.medicine.iu.edu>



Random acts of support

"Just love us."

"In medical school, little random acts of kindness can go a LONG way."

- Sometimes your student just needs someone to listen, and there is nothing you can do to fix their problems. Just be there to let them vent - no judgments.
- Send them texts/cards/voicemails/emails of encouragement. Don't be offended or put off if your gestures of love/communication go unanswered or mentioned for a few days.
- Offer to do some errands to save your loved one time and energy.
- Create a blog or an account on Facebook© or My Space© to stay in contact.

**"Encourage students to take some time to do something fun or unwind:
health sustaining activities like exercise and getting plenty of sleep."**

- If you plan to include your student in any trips, give plenty of advance notice so they can plan accordingly. They may need to study during the trip, but with advance notice, they manage the workload better. No surprise trips.
- You may want to discuss visiting just one day or night when there is an off weekend so your student's study schedule will be maintained.

"Empathy is always nice."

- Offer to help clean or repair things.
- Offer to pay bills.

"One of the things I remember most was when my mom and grandma "surprised" me by cleaning my apartment. They told me they were coming to take me to lunch, which they did, but then they insisted on cleaning for me. I would've never asked or said it was okay for them to come for that purpose alone, but it was so nice -- oh, and they filled my fridge."

**"Home cooked (especially those that can be reheated for several nights)
& free meals are always appreciated. Bring groceries"**

- Check in every once in awhile, especially if you are close by.
- Give a massage gift certificate. A massage is a wonderful way to de-stress.
- Be supportive every time you talk on the phone, remind your student why they are in school and how special they are because it is easy to get down, frustrated and/or want to give up.

"My mom was amazing - she would do little things throughout the school year to show me she cared: take my car for an oil change, make my favorite dessert before a big test, etc."



Exams/Grades/Studying

“Try to understand test weeks are very tough.”

- Weekends need to be for studying. Every once in a while, it’s ok for your student to take a day off, but 2 days off in a row will put them behind and should not be expected.
- Get a class and exam schedule from your student, so you know when you may or may not contact them.

“We will make you proud, but asking about every exam only encourages unhealthy stress and shifts the focus from *the real goal of becoming a good physician.*”

- Send encouraging emails or care packages around exams and finals.
- Students may have exams in clusters, so they will have one weekend a month off from studying. That is when they can socialize. Other times are probably not available.
- Don't judge how they manage time.

“We don't need the extra pressure to be perfect.”

“Be considerate, when we are studying, please don't distract us.”

- Don't say things like, "Well, as long as you pass..." because even passing can be hard sometimes.
- Tell your student frequently that you love them and that their grades won't change your love for them. Med school can be hard, and not everyone gets good grades.



Keeping committed relationships strong

“Think about your priorities in life ahead of time and make them happen. Otherwise, life will choose your priorities for you and they probably won’t be what you wanted.”

- Try to be understanding of your student’s time commitments.
- Try to be flexible.
- Help your student keep a good balance to avoid burning out.
- Try not to sweat the small stuff.

“Remember it will not last forever; some semesters are more difficult than others.”

- Take part in our medical/community organizations that involve couples. It helps to realize that you’re not the only one going through it.
- Cultivate your own personal development to enrich your relationship.

“Don’t let things build up. If there is a problem, try to talk early and openly about it.”

- Don't waste time fighting on the phone, agree to disagree and go on especially if you see each other infrequently.
- Eating a meal together daily. Take turns cooking and spend time together while cooking.
- Be flexible, your loved one may only have 5 minutes a day to spend on the phone at times but it is connecting.

"I am doing this for my wife and my future children."

- Your loved one will need you to help more around the house.
- They may ask you to meet them more than half way when they are stretched thin. Please be patient with them.
- It is essential to set aside time to talk. However, sometimes your loved one may just want to unwind by watching TV and that can be a chance to bond by just sitting together.
- Your student loves surprises, like a note in a book or on a windshield or by scraping the car before an early trip into the hospital.

"Nothing is more reassuring during a long study night than a hug and a kiss."



For spouses/significant others

Understand that we are juggling a lot, but you are still #1

- Talk with your student about when they are going to study. Some students go straight to the library to study after classes are done at 4 pm, and then come home at 8 pm for uninterrupted personal time with their family. Some need a break right after class and go home to relax before studying at 7 or 8pm. Everyone has a different style, so talking about it ahead of time helps eliminate arguments about not having enough time together.
- Be patient! Tell them what you need. They are busy and probably stressed, but your needs are important, too. If you need more time with them, you can figure it out together how to make that happen.
- Have faith that that your student really loves you and wants to be with you even when they are grouchy from a long day in class or so tired that all it seems they want to do is sleep.
- Encourage your student to keep their study routine. If they fall behind in class work, it is very difficult to catch up. However, don't let them live in the library or at their desk the whole year. Studying is important, but so are loved ones. If they are genuinely not spending enough time with you, pick a nice calm non-stressed moment to talk to them about it.

"Remind us that we really are intelligent and will make a great doctor one day."

- Create a loving safe environment for studying and relaxing.
- Couples sometimes argue before a huge exam. Students may then do poorly on the exam because they didn't study enough and are stressed because of the argument. Most disagreements can wait one more day. Avoid additional stress right before an exam. Pick your battles (and your timing) wisely. Ask: will it be important in a month? If not, let it go.

"Don't let things build up; talk about your feelings & concerns *before* they become too big."

- Both spouses/significant others need to listen and be curious.
- Your student needs your love.
- Make up before going to bed if you argue.
- Ask how you can help your student. For example, go through anatomy flash cards or let them practice using stethoscopes on you.
- Take dinner to school to at least spend an hour together. They appreciate and look forward to this.

**From Dr. Kunkle: exercise is a great preventative to stress, depression & anxiety.
It nourishes the brain with oxygen for better performance. Encourage Regular Exercise!!!**

"Gives us space to work, but don't go too far."

- Find out something your student hates to do (grocery shopping, take out the trash, etc.) and do it for them occasionally to make life easier.
- Pick up the slack when it comes to household chores and errands during test weeks.
- Encourage your student to go out to dinner once in a while or go to a friend's birthday party.
- Helping your student stay balanced is crucial (but can also lead to dissention). Realize from the get-go that the worst years are MS 1, 3 and residency intern year, so just know that from the start.
- Don't be jealous of your student's free time if they want to spend it in various ways that may not always entail your presence.

"Give a kiss when your loved one is studying or a quick back scratch."



For STUDENTS with spouses/significant others

"Don't forget to live your own life while on your quest to improve others' lives."

- There is definitely enough time to spend with your loved ones. Make seeing them a priority. Set aside one night/week as date night or try to eat dinner together nightly.
- Make time for your spouse, but don't make promises; broken promises hurt more than no promise made at all.
- Tell your spouse what is happening at med school, but also make sure you ask about his/her day and life (with full presence, attention and curiosity).
- Be careful to not get caught up in yourself.

"No matter how much studying is required, take even 10 minutes for each other."

- Probably 99% of your class will take at least one night off per week, so you're not missing out on study time.
- Even when you're tired, don't go to bed mad at each other.
- From Dr. Kunkle: Don't be defensive when your partner complains about his/her day. **Be curious** and avoid the attack-defend cycle.
- Make time for fun and don't feel guilty about it. The school, patients and books will always be there waiting for you. Opportunities to enjoy your youth/family however, may not always be around. Study time is study time, and relaxing time is relaxing time.
- Don't let things build up, talk about your thoughts, feelings and concerns before they become too big.

"Relationships that survive are those where communication is a high priority."

"You won't be a good physician if you are a lousy parent or spouse."

- From Dr. Kunkle: Remember your spouse is following your dream. It may not be his/her dream. Show regular appreciation for all that is done to support you. Do a household task/errand for your spouse/significant other that is disliked.
- Connect with your spouse/significant other throughout the day just to let them know that you are thinking about them, appreciate them or are concerned about them.
- Include your spouse/significant other in medical school activities social activities after test weeks.
- From Dr. Kunkle: Create a transitional ritual to let go of your stress before you walk in the door.

“Talk about other topics than medical school and make the time for them.”



For STUDENTS with CHILDREN

“Priorities first”

- Remind yourself that your children are an important part of life. Make sure to play with them almost every day. You chose to have them for a reason, and they will be there whether or not med school goes well.
- Medical students with children often opt to spend time with their children rather than attending many of the class's social gatherings.
- If age appropriate, include them in the medical fact of the day!
- Let them see you studying, it will set a good example.
- If studying with your children around is too distracting, go to the library.
- De-stress before you enter your home so that you can appreciate your children.



- For appointments with the Office of Counseling Services & Wellness: <http://counseling.medicine.iu.edu>

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

When a student or resident experiences an emergency such as a suicidal thought, panic attacks, or physical/sexual assault, an emergency counseling session or telephone contact will be scheduled the same day as the emergency call.

During regular business hours:

Call: 317-274-1224. Identify the situation as an emergency. Your call will be directed for the appropriate emergency care.

After business hours or weekends:

Indianapolis Campus:

Call 317-962-2622 for the Access Center for Clarian Health. Identify the situation as an emergency. Your call will be directed for the appropriate emergency care, or

- Go to nearest emergency room, or
- Call 911(on IUPUI campus: 9-911)

Statewide Campus Emergency Care

During regular business hours:

Call: 317-274-1224. Identify the situation as an emergency.

After business hours or weekends see:

<http://msaa.iusm.iu.edu/StudentDevelopment/personalcounselingCenters.asp> , or

- Go to nearest emergency room, or
- Call 911