

# Student Wellbeing Action Group (SWAG): Guidelines for Student Self-Care Days

## 1. Purpose of self-care days

There is substantial evidence that medical students suffer significant depression, anxiety and psychological distress, which can lead to poor health outcomes such as suicidal ideation and burnout (1-3). This evidence has led to many medical schools creating wellness and support programs to enhance wellbeing and manage psychological stress (4). In response, SWAG resolved to create guidelines for self-care days as one component of helping students' manage their wellbeing.

UNSW Medicine & Health values students' wellbeing and acknowledges the need for effective processes to facilitate self-care. The Faculty acknowledges that from time to time, medical students may need to take a day of leave to maintain good health and wellbeing. The Faculty also expects students to behave professionally and responsibly, as well as being accountable for their actions. These are important aspects of professionalism in Medicine.

Furthermore, self-care and planning for self-care are important components of students' development as medical professionals. Therefore, additional aims of self-care days are:

- Fostering and nurturing students' professional identity and professionalism skills, including developing the skills to work as an effective member of a workplace team;
- Refining students' approach to their learning - as self-directed learners and reflective practitioners managing and addressing their individual learning needs;
- Ensuring that students master skills in self-care planning as future health care workers.

Examples of appropriate use of self-care days include, but are not limited to:

- Engaging in activities that maintain physical and/or mental health;
- Learning new skills;
- Making time to maintain and foster family relationships and friendships.

Students should consider how these days will fit into their self-care plan, i.e. what areas of self-care will they address - physical, emotional, spiritual, professional, social, financial, and/or psychological. The resource below might assist with a student's self-care planning:

[https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19\\_Self-care-plan-for-healthcare-workers.pdf](https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19_Self-care-plan-for-healthcare-workers.pdf)

Students might wish to upload their self-care plan to their portfolio as evidence of achievement.

## 2. Rules and processes for self-care days

1. Each medical student is encouraged to utilise up to 8 self-care days in an academic year to maintain their mental health and wellbeing. These self-care days are not considered sick or carers leave. A maximum of two self-care days may be taken in any one 8-week course. In shorter courses (e.g. 4 weeks) a student may utilise a maximum of one self-care day. Self-care days cannot be taken on days when assessment tasks are scheduled or due. Where possible, self-care days should not be taken during the first week or last week of a course. Additional directions regarding how self-care days can be utilised may be provided in Phase or Course guides, to maintain the quality of student learning and to ensure the principles of professionalism are not compromised within the Medicine program.
2. Students are not required to detail the specific activity planned for their self-care day. However, when discussing and planning a self-care day with their Course Convenor, facilitator, Clinical Teaching Unit or supervisor, students are strongly encouraged to explore appropriate self-care activities. Students are encouraged to develop their skills in negotiating leave or time off with teachers and supervisors as these skills will be required when attached to clinical teams as junior doctors.
3. Plans to review and catch up on any learning activities held during self-care days should be prepared in advance, as it is each student's responsibility to ensure that learning of important content and skills is not missed and all course requirements are satisfactorily completed.
4. The process for a student taking a self-care day will be as follows:
  - a. Discuss with the relevant Course Convenor, facilitator, Clinical Teaching Unit or supervisor their intention to utilise a self-care day at least 24 hours prior to taking leave;
  - b. Each self-care day needs to be recorded. Register the date of your self-care day online utilising eMed Portfolio (<https://emed.med.unsw.edu.au/Portfolio.nsf>) at least 24 hours prior to taking leave;
  - c. Advise peers, teachers, research or clinical team members who might be affected by their absence; and ensure their absence will not negatively affect others (e.g. make sure someone else covers their duties for the day);
  - d. Ensure that you will catch up on learning following the self-care day;
  - e. If a student accumulates more self-care days than recommended during a course or across the academic year, the relevant Phase or Course Convenor and the Faculty Wellbeing Officer will be notified, as the student might require additional support.

N.B. Absence due to self-care days will not be considered as a basis for special consideration related to assessment tasks.

Version 4 approved by SWAG on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2021 and CDC on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2021

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1. Rotenstein LS, Ramos MA, Torre M, et al. Prevalence of depression, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation among medical students. *JAMA*. 2016;316(21):2214-2236.
  2. Dyrbye LN, Thomas MR, Massie FS, et al. Burnout and suicidal ideation among U.S. medical students. *Ann Intern Med*. 2008;149(5):334.
  3. Dyrbye LN, Thomas MR, Shanafelt TD. Systematic review of depression, anxiety, and other indicators of psychological distress among U.S. and Canadian medical students. *Acad Med*. 2006;81(4):354-373.
  4. Schutt A, Chretien KC, Woodruff JN, et al. National Survey of Wellness Programs in U.S. and Canadian Medical Schools. *Acad Med*. 2021. DOI: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000003953.