

## THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

# Broadening Friendships Beyond Medicine

Michael Myers, M.D., often hears physicians say they'd like to expand their circle of friends beyond their colleagues in medicine, but they're not sure how to go about it.

They say, "I realize there's a whole other world out there" or "I think my work sometimes gets me too focused on disease and illness, or death or dying, and I forget sometimes that there are other people who are doing fascinating things," said Dr. Myers, a psychiatrist based in Vancouver, B.C., who specializes in physician health.

Sometimes his psychiatry colleagues make statements such as, "When I'm with my nonmedical, no-psychiatry friends, I realize not everybody's depressed," Dr. Myers said. "They find it refreshing."

For physicians, the pinch for time to sustain or cultivate friendships starts with the demands of medical school and continues with residency training, possible fellowship training, and launching a career. But some manage to carve out time for their nonmedical friends.

"I think it depends where people practice and how demanding their work is as to whether or not they're likely to keep up with nonmedical friends or make new

nonmedical friends," Dr. Myers said.

Why care? Because interacting with people who are not doctors helps you realize that life exists outside of medicine, said Bruce Flamm, M.D., area research chairman and a practicing ob.gyn. at the Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Riverside, Calif.

"That's not to discount those doctors who live for their career; it means everything to them," Dr. Flamm said. "They'd live in the hospital if they could. That's fine, too. But for every one of those, there are probably 100 doctors who wish they could have more time to do other things."

If you struggle to expand your circle of friends beyond your medical colleagues, experts interviewed for this column offered the following advice:

► **Get involved in your community.** Seek opportunities with your community center, church, synagogue, Rotary Club, or the school your children attend. James Gill, M.D., serves on his church's parish council in Wilmington, Del. In this role, he helps set

church policy and also lobbies for fairness to immigrants and people who struggle to make ends meet.

He said that such involvement "gives you broader perspective on the world, which almost has to translate into your profession," said Dr. Gill, director of health



Dr. Bruce Flamm finds that taking his dogs, Zoe (left) and Hunter (right), to a dog park is a good way to socialize.

services research in the department of family and community medicine at Wilmington-based Christiana Care Health System. "You also get that broader perspective by being involved in the Rotary Club, with the soccer team, or whatever. You tend to see people at different places in their lives with different levels of education and social strata, and [different] occupations. That provides you with a richer perspective when you interact with patients."

Becoming involved in the Wilmington community was easy for Dr. Gill because he practices in the same general area where he was raised and where he did his family medicine residency. "The people I spend most of my time with are my extended family and friends from high school," he said. "But I got involved in other things. You're probably not going to make a lot of good friends just by sitting at the bar or passing somebody on the street. You meet people by getting involved. The way I've done it is get very involved in church-related issues and volunteer social issues."

He added that people generally consider physicians as community leaders, educated people who have a broad perspective on the world. "In order to do that, you have to expand your horizons and circle of friends. If you hang out with physicians all the time, your perspective is not going to be very broad, and I think your ability to be a community leader is fairly limited."

► **Seek a support network.** When Nicolette Horbach, M.D., was in her 30s, she joined a small network of women in her area who became mothers around the same time. That was 13 years ago, but today she and the dozen or so members of the group, including an FBI agent, accountants, and stay-at-home moms, still meet once a month over dinner for friendship and support. "We've had people go through the death of a husband, divorce, and difficulties with children," said Dr. Horbach, a urogynecologist at Northern Virginia Pelvic Surgery Associates, Annandale. "It's a grounding force outside of medicine, and these people become like your extended family."

Other topics discussed have ranged from toilet training and how to pick a preschool to the frustrations of balancing work and home life. "That kind of solid group gives you some continuity with different phases of your life," Dr. Horbach said.

She also expanded her circle of friends by volunteering for social activities at her son's school. She recalls arranging her schedule one day between surgeries so she could be the room mother at her son's class Valentine's Day party.

"You may not be able to be PTA president or chair the fundraising committee that's going to meet every week, but you can do specific functions, whether it's the book fair for a weekend or the school parties—something like that where you are being just like one of the other parents," she said. "You're physically there, your kid sees you as involved in the situation, and you have the chance to meet the other families that your kids interact with."

► **Find a hobby.** If you engage yourself in a hobby such as record collecting or league participation in your favorite sport, "you end up meeting a lot of people from all different walks of life and all different fields, yet you share that common interest," Dr. Flamm said.

Two years ago he joined a local astronomy club. He had dabbled in astronomy in high school, "but not seriously."

The club holds monthly meetings in a local auditorium and monthly star viewing parties in the desert.

Becoming a collector is another way to meet people, added Dr. Flamm, who is a longtime collector of calculators. "Most of the people who are into that are engineers who have no interest in medicine at all, but you can meet various people," he said. "When I was actively collecting calculators a few years ago, my wife and I would go to a flea market almost every weekend."

Another enriching experience for Dr. Flamm has been acquiring a springer spaniel puppy named Zoe. He and his wife brought her home after their two 14-year-old dogs died last year, and they recently adopted a 3-month-old puppy named Hunter. They occasionally take Zoe and Hunter to dog-friendly parks in their area, "where you meet the nicest people who are always interested in dogs," Dr. Flamm said.

Dr. Horbach noted the danger of living only for medicine is that you become "very one-dimensional. There is difficulty keeping up physician morale because of all the things we're battling in terms of finances, paperwork, and insurance. If you have a chance to branch out and talk with other people, you understand that many industries are going through some of the same challenges that we face in medicine. They may have different aspects, but I think you get a better perspective on the demands that are made in the professional world across the board. Everyone now is expected to do more with less and still fight issues relative to compensation. Keeping that perspective is important, so you don't foster increasing frustration, resentment, or dissatisfaction," she said. ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau



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