

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.

"I hear so many first-person accounts from physicians who say it's really neat to be going out with some people who have nothing to do with medicine at all," said Dr. Myers, a psychiatrist based in Vancouver, B.C., who specializes in physician health. "Then they make statements like, '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.'"

In fact, 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."

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 this 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 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



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

patients," according to Dr. Gill.

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

Helpful Reading

The physicians who were interviewed for this story recommended these books:

- "Workaholics: The Respectable Addicts" by Barbara Killinger, Ph.D. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Firefly Books, 1997).
- "Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal" by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).
- "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ" by Daniel Goleman (New York: Bantam, 1995).
- "First Things First" by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Fireside, 1994).
- "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Fireside, 1989).

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."

Another thing she did to expand her friendships was to learn tennis, a sport that her husband plays and that her 13-year-old son plays competitively. Two years ago she took lessons and eventually joined a league. "A number of my current friends now are from that group of women," she said.

► **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," he said.

The club holds monthly meetings in a local auditorium and monthly star viewing parties in the desert. "Not viewing for Hollywood stars," he quips. He makes every effort to attend the events.

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 passed away 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," he said. ■

One Physician's Profile in Friendship

In the mid-1990s, Dr. Toni Harris realized that pressures from her academic medicine post as chief of benign gynecology at the University of California, Davis, Medical Center were taking a personal toll.

"It was going to work at the crack of dawn and coming home after a normal person would eat dinner," she recalled. "I didn't know the news and I didn't take care of myself physically, and I didn't sustain my interpersonal relationships outside of my immediate circle of friends and family." She resigned from the post in 1996 and went into private practice, but learned that the demands of that setting were greater

than she expected. That segment of her career ended in 2002.

"I got into my 50s and I said, 'Life is now. One has no idea how long one's life will be.'" Dr. Harris is back at the UC medical center part-time and is a partner in a medical device start-up company.

One of the goals she has set for herself is to pursue friendships. One of her most cherished is with a teenager, Chris Benderev, who is the son of a urologist she worked with in private practice. "He was 10 when we became friends, and we have actively cultivated that relationship," said Dr. Harris, who does not have her own children. "I'm

more than a surrogate aunt, more like a truly good friend to a young person, and a mentor. He goes on vacations with my husband and me, he comes to see us without the rest of his family, and we get to participate in the decision-making process as he's gotten older about what he wants to do in life."

Three years ago when her husband was on duty in Kosovo with the Army Reserve, she and Chris went to the movies nearly every Friday night. "To have a 14-year-old boy want to go out to the movies with a 55-year-old non-relative who he considers his friend has been one of the real honors of my life," she said.

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau