

Student Wellness Week Kicks Off with ‘Paws That Refreshes’

Learning to be a doctor can be – to put it mildly – stressful. Medical students face unrelenting pressure with so much to learn, intense competition, long days, and sleepless nights fueled by fast food and *cafecitos*.



First year M.D. student Anya Hall relaxes with therapy dog, Passion, during the kick-off event for Student Wellness Week

At the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, Student Wellness Week aims to equip future doctors with coping strategies for the stress and self-doubt they encounter during four grueling years of medical school.

Organized by the Wellness Advisory Council, which is chaired by Andrew Stine-Rowe, a third-year M.D./MPH student, and Madeline Cohen, a second-year M.D. student, Student Wellness Week is now in its second year. It kicked off December 3 with

an hour-long pet therapy session in the Student Lounge of the Rosenstiel Medical Sciences Building.

Close to three dozen students, many of whom had just come from an exam, gathered for a meet-and-greet with a trio of four-legged therapists. The stress visibly evaporated from students' faces as they petted and played with Passion, a small black Shih Tzu; Sparky, a scruffy, gray Schnauzer mix; and Wesley, a massive, 170-pound, black and white Great Dane.



Student Wellness Week chairs Alexandria Poitier, Rikera Taylor, and Elisa Karhu, all second-year M.D. students, with Passion, the therapy dog

Student Wellness Week chairs Alexandria Poitier, Rikera Taylor, and Elisa Karhu, all second-year M.D. students, helped organize the pet therapy session, along with all of the other events planned for the week. The schedule this year includes free massages; workshops on meditation, mindfulness, and dance; and a series of lunchtime talks on subjects such as “Overcoming Anxiety and Imposter Syndrome,” “The Neuroscience of Mindfulness,” and “Preventing Burnout.”

Therapy dogs are always a popular draw, said Taylor, who

majored in psychology as an undergraduate and believes that social, physical, and mental wellness need to be emphasized as part of the medical school curriculum.

“Pet therapy is an excellent way for students to relax, have some fun, and take their minds off the stress of school for a little while,” she said.

Staying fit and maintaining healthy eating habits is also an important part of student health and wellness, according to Karhu, who is also part of the lifestyle medicine interest group that will be serving up quick and healthy recipes tailored to student budgets.

“I’m trying to remind fellow students that it’s not wrong to take time to take care of yourself,” Karhu said. “It’s important because it not only helps you be a better student, it also helps you be a better caregiver.”



Students at the Miller School get to know Wesley, a pet therapy dog who helped kick off Student Wellness Week

The pet therapy session was followed by a lunchtime talk featuring Addys Karunaratne, Ph.D., a staff psychologist with

the University of Miami Counseling Center who spends four days a week on the Miller School campus counseling medical students.

“Anxiety is especially common among medical school students,” said Dr. Karunaratne. “Being anxious and driven has really worked for them, but they have to be able to modulate and to manage those feelings or else it affects their ability to focus. There’s also a constant self-questioning if they are as good as their peers, or if they can cut it as doctors – something we call the imposter complex – and that self-doubt can be debilitating.”

To combat the stress of medical school, Dr. Karunaratne says students can take advantage of individual and group counseling that teaches them how to foster self-compassion and use mindfulness and cognitive behavior therapy to manage anxious feelings and challenge negative thoughts.



Kristi Dutta, left, and Joana Karanxha, right, both second-year M.D. students, unwind with Sparky, a therapy dog from the Humane Society of Greater Miami

Hilit F. Mechaber, M.D. '95, associate professor of medicine and associate dean for student services, serves as an advisor to the Wellness Advisory Council and is an enthusiastic proponent of Student Wellness Week.

“This week is all about highlighting the health and wellness resources available to our students, and it’s also a wonderful tribute to their creativity and leadership,” Dr. Mechaber said. “It also showcases our numerous student organizations devoted to enhancing the student experience across all domains of well-being – from mind, social, and body, to academic and professional development and community service.”

For more information about Student Wellness Week, click [here](#).