



A Pedi-Press Feature Series

Cultivating Connections Corner

July 2026 Edition



Welcome!

Dear All,

Welcome to the July edition of Pedi Press: Cultivating Connections. This issue is dedicated to the many ways we nurture wellness, joy, and community across the Department of Pediatrics.

I look forward to July every year. It brings new students, new trainees, new faculty, and new programs, along with a renewed sense of energy and possibility. There is always excitement as people arrive, roles shift, and familiar routines are reimagined through fresh perspectives. Even with all the transitions that July brings, I find this season both stimulating and fun.

I also love that July gives us time to enjoy summer activities with friends and family. I know it can be tricky to navigate summer schedules for young children, but it is also a joy to see what they discover and learn in settings outside of school. In our family, that often means taking our grandchildren, Tommy and Coco, to the local pool. I may call it “swimming lessons,” but most days involve hours of water slides, diving boards, ice cream, and plenty of salty chips.

Summer is full of moments to navigate, celebrate, and manage. July reminds us that change and renewal often arrive together. It asks us to stay flexible, support one another, and look for joy in both our personal and professional lives.

As we welcome a new academic year, I am grateful for the creativity, kindness, and care each of you brings to our patients, families, learners, and colleagues. I hope this issue offers both inspiration and practical reminders of the many ways we continue cultivating connection, wellness, and joy together.

Warm regards,
Joan Shook 🌸

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The start of Cultivating Connections

With Joan Shook

About a year ago, the Department of Pediatrics received the results of the Press Ganey Engagement Survey, which offered important insight into how faculty and staff experience their work, including their sense of engagement, alignment with organizational goals, and perceptions of safety culture. With an 80% response rate across the Department, the results provided meaningful insight into both department-wide themes and division-level experiences.

At that time, activities organized under Cultivating Connections were already helping to advance conversations about community, belonging, and wellbeing. Building on that work and responding to the survey results, the Department convened a diverse faculty wellbeing committee to help guide the next phase of reflection and action. With representation from most divisions and campuses, the committee has brought curiosity, thoughtfulness, and energy to the process.

One of the committee's central efforts has been to better understand the lived experience of work through listening rounds. To date, the team has held more than 30 listening sessions and reached more than 600 faculty members. These conversations have been informative, candid, and inspiring. They have also reminded us that connection itself is a powerful source of renewal.

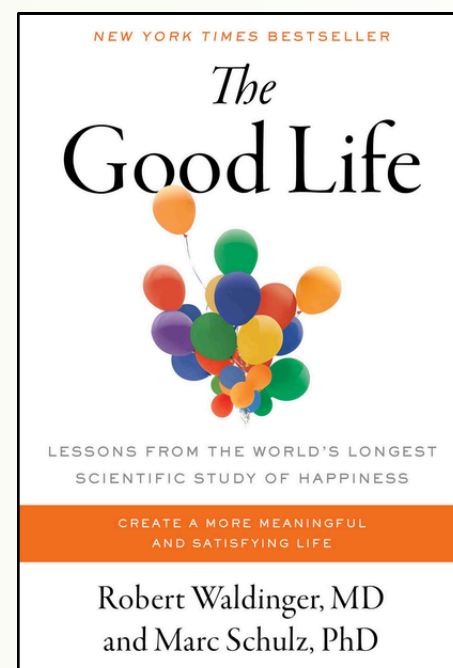
The format is intentionally simple. In each session, faculty are invited to reflect on three questions: What brings you joy? What gets in the way of your joy? And who deserves recognition for contributing positively to your work environment?

Across divisions and campuses, several themes have emerged. Faculty describe finding joy in the people they work with, the patients and families they serve, the learners they teach and mentor, and the intellectual stimulation that comes from meaningful work. Each of these sources of joy is rooted in relationships—with teammates, patients, families, learners, and the broader mission that connects us.

Again and again, the wellbeing team has been struck by the energy, pride, and generosity that surface in these conversations. The sessions have revealed not only the challenges people face, but also the deep commitment faculty bring to their colleagues, their patients and families, and the people who depend on them.

These conversations also remind us that good relationships do not happen by accident. They must be nurtured, protected, and strengthened over time. In many ways, this is at the heart of wellbeing: not simply the absence of stress or difficulty, but the presence of connection, purpose, and belonging.

This idea is central in **The Good Life by Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz**, which summarizes findings from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the longest-running scientific study of human happiness. In reflecting on the good life at work, the authors ask us to consider whether the value of our professional lives lies beyond compensation and accomplishment, extending to the vitality and meaning we experience through connection with others. Even an ordinary workday can offer opportunities to strengthen relationships and deepen our sense of purpose. As Waldinger and Schulz write, "If we had to take all 84 years of the Harvard Study and boil it down to a single principle for living, it would be this: Good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period."



As the wellbeing committee continues its work, we are grateful to everyone who has participated in these conversations with openness and honesty. Your reflections are helping us better understand where joy lives in our work, what threatens it, and how we can continue cultivating the relationships that sustain us. We are also deeply grateful for all that you do every day for one another, for your patients and families, and for your teams. It is an honor to be surrounded by such remarkable colleagues. ❤️



Social Connections and Relationships

With Kelley Slack, Lacey Schmidt, Lara Shekerdemian



Infectious Diseases Pop-up!

Cultivating Connections, a new initiative launched by **Dr. Lara Shekerdemian**, Chair of the Department of Pediatrics, is designed to strengthen our sense of community and ensure that the dedication, hard work, and well-being of our teams are truly seen and supported. Rooted in evidence-based practices, the program aims to enhance communication, create space for meaningful dialogue, and help ease the demands of daily clinical and academic work.

A key feature of the initiative includes on-the-go visits from departmental leaders, including **Dr. Shekerdemian** alongside **Drs. Slack and Schmidt**, our departmental organizational psychologists. On May 14, 2026, they visited the Pediatric Infectious Diseases group to share snacks, provide helpful resources, and—most importantly—listen to the perspectives and priorities of the team.

if you are interested in having **Dr Shekerdemian** visit your group, reach out to **Mary Lou Apalisok** at mxapalis@texaschildrens.org.

BCM CHRISTUS Children's Pulmonary Retreat: Fostering Meaningful Connections

On June 19th, the Pulmonary Division at CHRISTUS Children's in San Antonio gathered for a team retreat focused on strengthening team communication and collaboration in their fast-paced clinical environment. Using the DISC framework, faculty and staff explored their own natural and adapted communication styles, learned to recognize and support the styles and role-specific needs of their colleagues, and practiced concrete strategies for turning stress and venting into productive dialogue. The morning combined self-reflection, hands-on activities, and cross-role discussion, leaving the division with shared guidelines and a common vocabulary for supporting one another under pressure. Through engaging discussions and team-building activities (and an afternoon spent bowling), participants returned with renewed energy and a strengthened commitment to advancing the mission of CHRISTUS Children's Pulmonary Division.





Social Connections and Relationships

With Geeta Singhal – featuring Betul Yilmaz Furtun

Empowering Tomorrow's Leaders: An Introduction to Leadership College

The BCM Department of Pediatrics Faculty Development team launched the Leadership College, a program developed in direct response to faculty requests for advanced leadership training. Spearheaded by **Dr. Geeta Singhal** and **Jeff Kim**, the initiative is designed to equip faculty with the skills needed to lead effectively and drive meaningful change within the department.

Launched in October 2025, the year-long program focuses on building essential leadership competencies while empowering participants to lead with purpose rather than simply manage. A cornerstone of the curriculum is the transition from theory to practice. Throughout the program, each participant identifies a real-world challenge within their own work environment and develops it into an actionable leadership project. By applying concepts learned in the classroom to these practical pediatric challenges, participants create meaningful improvements that strengthen their teams and advance the department's mission.



A word from our students

Betul Yilmaz Furtun, MD, FASE, FAAP

Associate Professor, Pediatrics-Cardiology

Medical Director, Fetal Cardiology

Texas Children's Hospital / Baylor College of Medicine



My leadership project focused on creating a multidisciplinary first-trimester prenatal clinic that integrates fetal cardiology, maternal-fetal medicine, and genetics to provide earlier diagnosis, counseling, and coordinated care for high-risk pregnancies. Advances in imaging and genetics now allow us to identify many congenital anomalies much earlier in pregnancy, yet care remains fragmented and often delayed. This program aims to bridge that gap by bringing together the right specialists at the right time, helping families receive answers and support earlier in their pregnancy journey.

Beyond improving the patient experience, this initiative has the potential to differentiate our institution as a national leader in early prenatal diagnosis and fetal care. By offering a coordinated, first-trimester evaluation pathway, we can strengthen referral relationships, improve care continuity, create opportunities for research and education, and establish innovative models of care that are not widely available elsewhere. Earlier diagnosis may also allow us to develop and offer novel management strategies, including fetal cardiac interventions and other targeted therapies, that have the potential to alter disease trajectory and improve outcomes for both mothers and babies. Ultimately, the goal is to transform prenatal care from a reactive process into a proactive, patient-centered approach.

Through the leadership program, I learned how to turn a clinical vision into a strategic initiative by building partnerships, aligning stakeholders, and creating a sustainable plan for implementation. Equally important, the program reinforced that effective leadership starts with leading by example—with authenticity, integrity, and a commitment to earning the trust of those around you. I learned that strong leaders must not only be high performers and visionaries, but also supportive teammates who empower others, foster collaboration, and help their teams succeed. These lessons will continue to shape how I lead and how I work to create meaningful and lasting change for patients, families, and colleagues.



Physical and Lifestyle Well-Being

With Lacey Schmidt



Counting Blessings



Counting your blessings is a cornerstone of savoring that retrains your brain to "sort for the good" rather than scanning for problems. This habit is particularly powerful for building emotional resilience and has even been linked to improved heart health and longevity.

Daily Exercises

Psychologists recommend several structured ways to build a "counting blessings" habit:

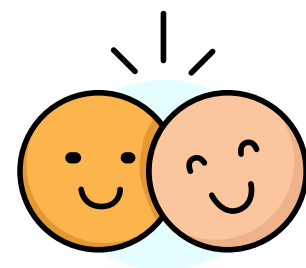
- **The "Three Good Things" Ritual:** Every evening, write down three enjoyable experiences from your day.
- **The Savoring Twist:** After listing each item, write one sentence explaining why it happened or why you are grateful for it (e.g., "I enjoyed my tea because I took ten minutes of quiet just for myself").
- **Focus on the Sensation:** Spend 20-30 seconds mentally reliving the experience to let the feeling "sink in".
- **The "Morning Coffee" Meditation:** Use your first cup of tea or coffee as a cue. While you sip, notice the warmth of the mug and the aroma, and mentally name three blessings you are looking forward to or already possess.
- **A "Gratitude Jar":** Write one joy from your day on a slip of paper and drop it into a jar. Over time, this provides a visual reminder of the "fullness" of your life that you can revisit on harder days.
- **Relational Savoring:** Share your "daily favorite" with a partner or friend. This communal sharing strengthens social bonds and amplifies the positive emotion for both of you.



Shifts in Thinking

To help your mind embrace this practice, try adding these perspectives to your daily internal monologue:

- **Look for "Micro-Blessings":** Don't wait for big events. Savor the mundane: the way sunlight hits a wall, a comfortable chair, or a neighbor's wave.
- **Accept Compliments Fully:** Instead of downplaying praise (e.g., "Oh, this old thing?"), Say "Thank you" and allow yourself to feel the other person's positive regard.
- **Practice "Thankful Thinking":** Silently say "thank you" to your body for getting you out of bed or to a pet for making you smile.
- **The "Life Review" Perspective:** Occasionally reflect on major life challenges you've overcome. Recognizing your own resilience and the help you received can deepen your current sense of being blessed.
- **Use AI as a Daily or Weekly Micro-blessing Check-In Partner:**
<https://gemini.google.com/share/8dae95121eec>





Mindfulness in Practice

With Lindsey Gurganious



Mindful Email Management

In today's email-driven work environment, mindful email management means ensuring that your inbox serves as a tool rather than a constant source of interruption. Many of us are familiar with the distraction of seeing unread messages accumulate throughout the day, often drawing our attention away from high-priority work, meetings, or personal time.

Although turning off notifications or removing work email from your phone can be helpful, there are additional strategies that can support greater focus, productivity, and work-life balance. Below are a few approaches worth considering!

Strategies

- **Disable Notifications:** Turn off desktop and mobile pop-ups, sounds, and badges on all devices to eliminate constant interruptions and noise.
- **Schedule Dedicated Email Review Times:** Process emails during 3-4 designated periods each day instead of checking continuously, allowing for greater focus and productivity.
- **The 4D Method (Process with Purpose):** My personal favorite! Review each email only once and immediately decide to:
 - **Delete** (trash)
 - **Delegate** (pass on)
 - **Defer** (defer to a later time)
 - **Do** (if it takes less than 2-5 minutes).
- **Streamline your System:** Use folders and action trackers to organize emails and ensure important messages are handled promptly without distractions. Set up filters to automatically bypass your inbox for recurring newsletters, receipts, or automated system updates.
- **Focus on What Matters Most:** Give priority to critical tasks and communications from key stakeholders instead of treating all emails with the same level of urgency.

Mindful Communication

- **Pause Before Responding:** Implement a "10-second rule" or step away from the keyboard for a few minutes before responding to emotional or challenging emails to avoid knee-jerk reactions.
- **The "Send to Self" Test:** Before sending a delicate email, send it to yourself first to objectively review the tone.
- **Choose the Right Medium:** If an email chain is contentious or emotional, pick up the phone or have a brief meeting instead of engaging in a back-and-forth email fight.
- **Set clear Boundaries:** Limit email checks to specific times and avoid responding outside of work hours to protect your focus and personal time. Utilize scheduled send features to deliver emails during normal business hours, even if you draft them after hours. Use out-of-office messages when unavailable to provide clear instructions, communicate your schedule, and set expectations for when a response can be expected.
- **Use Clear and Effective Subject Lines:** The first thing we see when an email is received, is the subject line! Using clear and concise email subjects will help recipients better understand the purpose of your message and help them (and you) locate it later if needed.
- **Leverage Technology:** Utilize technology and AI solutions to thoughtfully manage email overload, improve efficiency, and focus attention on high-priority communications. **Click here for CoPilot and Inbox Management Tips Here!**





Mindfulness in Practice

Small Shifts. Big Impact.

In today's fast-paced world, it's easy to move from one task to the next on autopilot. Between the demands of work, personal responsibilities, and life's unexpected challenges, stress can quickly become part of our daily routine. Research shows that one simple practice—mindfulness—can help us slow down, refocus, and become more intentional in how we respond to the moments that matter.

After 45 years of research, Professor Ellen Langer's work reminds us that mindfulness isn't about emptying your mind or sitting in silence. It's about paying attention with purpose, embracing curiosity, and noticing the present moment without judgment. By choosing awareness over autopilot, we open ourselves to new perspectives and opportunities.

Practicing mindfulness can help reduce stress, strengthen relationships, improve focus, and build resilience in both our personal and professional lives. By becoming more present with ourselves and those around us, we're better equipped to navigate challenges, appreciate small moments, and support our overall well-being.



How mindfulness supports your work, lifestyle, and mental health



Enhances Focus and Presence: Noticing the little things—like a child's smile or a colleague's effort—helps you stay grounded and engaged in the moment.



Builds Resilience: Mindfulness helps you respond (instead of react) to stress, setbacks, and uncertainty—something we all experience in healthcare.



Strengthens Relationships: Being fully present with patients, families, and teammates builds trust, empathy, and connection.



Supports Your Health: Mindfulness can lower stress, improve sleep, and even boost immune function—benefits that help you show up as your best self.



Sparks Creativity and Clarity: Letting go of rigid thinking opens spaces for new ideas, adaptability, and better decision-making.

Simple Ways to bring Mindfulness into your day

- Take three mindful breaths. Find a comfortable position in a quiet space. Close your eyes, or keep them open if that's more comfortable. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, then exhale gently through your mouth. Repeat several times, focusing on your breath and bringing your attention to the present moment.
- Notice one new thing each day. Take a moment to observe something you may have overlooked—a kind gesture, a new perspective, or a small detail in your surroundings.
- Ask, "What else is possible?" When faced with a challenge, approach it with curiosity instead of assumptions to open yourself to new solutions.
- Pause to appreciate a small win. Celebrate everyday accomplishments, no matter how small, and recognize the progress you've made.
- Be fully present in conversations. Put away distractions, listen with intention, and avoid multitasking to strengthen your connections with others.

Mindfulness doesn't require more time—it changes how we use the time we already have. By caring for ourselves and staying present, we're better equipped to care for our patients, colleagues, and loved ones.

Let's make mindfulness a daily ally in our work, our lives and our wellbeing. ❤️



Institutional Wellness Resources



Texas Children's Hospital Resources:

Designed with the well-being of our **physician and APP faculty** in mind, the **Medical Staff Lounge** provides a dedicated space to recharge and connect. The lounge features respite rooms, workstations, lockers, fitness rooms, a lactation room, and daily food deliveries to support faculty throughout the workday.

It available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for APPs and Physicians. The Lounge is located at the West Tower Basement 1 (B1) in room BB135.

If you have any questions, contact **Twanna Guillory** at taguillo@texaschildrens.org or **Jocelyn Price** at japrice1@texaschildrens.org.

If an employee experiences any issues accessing the lounge, they can contact the Medical Staff Service office for assistance, contact **Twanna Guillory** at taguillo@texaschildrens.org, or call their office at **832-824-1052!**

Inside of the Medical Staff Lounge

Not pictured but the lounge provides a dining area that offers free food, snacks, and drinks!



Lactation Room with fridge provided



Workout Rooms with Towels Provided



Workstation Room



Respite or Private room - 2 rooms with couches



MSS on Call Room:

A private designated space where medical staff can rest, utilize the workstations, and have their own private restroom. The MSS On-Call Room is available on a reservation basis.

To reserve the MSS On Call Room, please send an email to MSSOnCallRoom@texaschildrens.org.

If you need after-hour assistance, please contact **Twanna Guillory** at **832-824-1052**. If you need Housekeeping, please call 34278 or 34300 or mission control 4-5400



Development and Growth



COACHING FOR OPTIMAL REFLECTION
AND EFFECTIVENESS

with Kelley Slack

Why Self-Awareness Is the First Step in Coaching

Think back to when you first arrived at Texas Children's and had to find your way through the Texas Medical Center. You could locate your destination on the map, but without knowing your current location, it wasn't very useful.

Coaching often starts the same way. Before focusing on improving feedback, navigating a difficult interaction, or strengthening your teaching, you need a clear sense of where you are now.



Each of us interprets situations through a **personal lens** shaped by our training, experiences, expectations, and personality. That lens influences what we notice and how we make sense of what we see—often without realizing it. Self-awareness helps make that lens visible, especially in moments when we move quickly from observation to interpretation.

Self-awareness can develop through reflection, often in conversation with a coach. At times, coaches also use structured assessments, such as a strengths-based tool, a 360-degree leadership feedback process, a workplace personality inventory, or a comprehensive personality measure, to help accelerate that process. These assessments can reinforce what already feels true and, at times, surface insights that explain the “why” behind patterns or outcomes. Used well, they add perspective, deepen self-understanding, and help identify areas for targeted growth.

Build Self-Awareness

Pause and check your thinking with simple questions:

- What did I actually observe?
- What assumptions might I be making?
- What outcome do I really want here?



And remember....

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

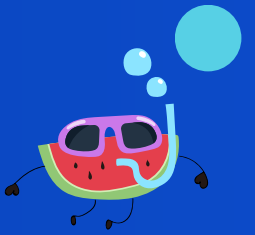
—Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning

To connect with the CORE Coaching Program, please click the button below.

[To connect, click here!](#)

How do you recharge over the summer?

This summer, we set out to discover how others manage to reduce stress and enhance their overall well-being through various tips, tricks, activities, routines, and small habits. Here are some noteworthy ones worth mentioning:



From Tatiana Di Napoli

"In the summer I like to recharge by being in nature, traveling, and spending time with friends! But on a daily basis, my little faithful furry friend Laila is the one that helps day by day to relax. She is already 13 years old but is still full of life; she's always up for walks, adventures, or lounging. Spending time with her is always relaxing!"



From Grace P. Tamesis

"There is no better education than travel and immersing oneself in the local culture we are privileged to be invited to inhabit. I sign up for classes and learn the celebrated traditions. For this trip, we learned lontar (local palm leaf) weaving and creating Balinese herbal scrub called boreh: made of ground rice, cloves, coriander, turmeric, ginger, candlenut, and Balinese salt."



From Linda Spain

For summer: "I love to paint landscapes!"



From Marika Highberger

"Coming together to share in the World Cup and participating in the 2.2mile Oranje walk with my kids was a perfect way to spend time together as a family! My mother is from the Netherlands and those roots are deeply embedded in my life. We consider ourselves lucky to have been there for this once in a lifetime experience! So grateful we could experience it together! And grateful to live in a city that joined in this beautiful tradition!"



From Aikaterini Anagnostou

"My favorite way to unplug and recharge during the summer is hiking in remote areas of the USA and in national parks. No phone signal, just beautiful and peaceful nature. The attached photo is from the Spooky Gulch canyon in the Grand Staircase Escalante Monument - narrow sandstone passages some only 10-12 inches wide. Beautiful Navajo sandstone and lots of scrambling!"

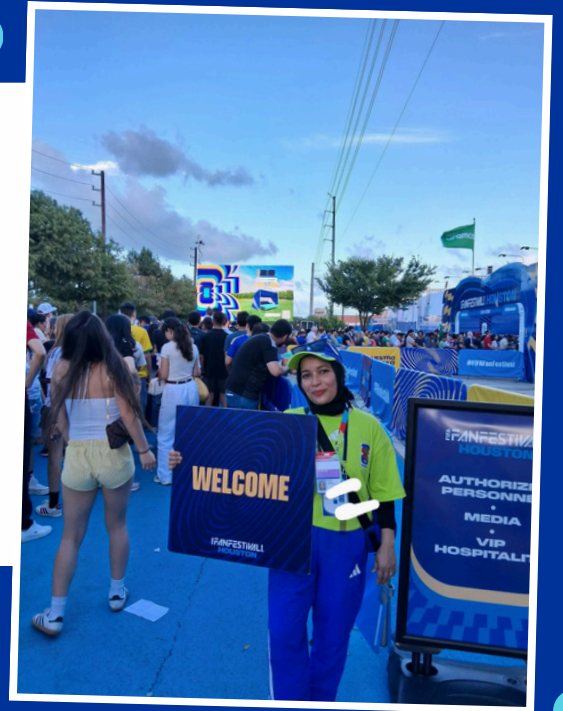




How do you recharge over the summer?

From Laboni Malik

“For me, the best way to unwind and recharge is by giving back to the community. I absolutely love spending my weekends volunteering. Stepping away from my daily routine to help others is incredibly fulfilling, and most recently, I volunteered during the FIFA World Cup, which was a wonderful experience. It gave me the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds, contribute to a large international event that made Houston proud, and make a positive impact. Volunteering helps me relax, stay connected with others, and return to work feeling refreshed and inspired.”

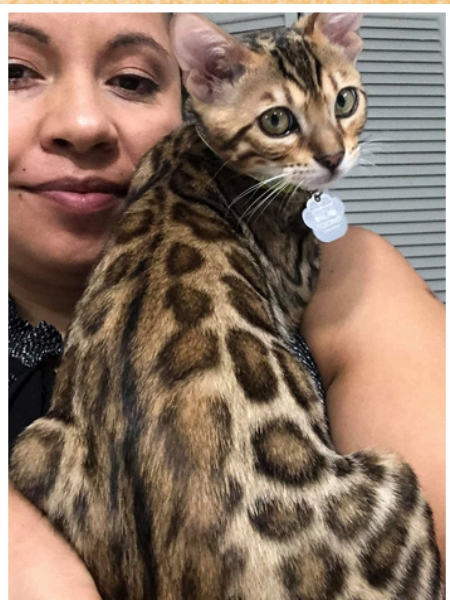


From Ricardo Quinonez

“This summer, I’m relaxing by rocking out with my physician band! I’m the one singing, and the guitarist behind me is Dr. Adam Cohen.”

From Sadaf F. Batla

“This summer, I’ve been enjoying a new hobby—crocheting a baby blanket while watching FIFA World Cup matches or Movies with my Family. This activity helps me reduce screen time, slow down, and be more mindful and present with my family, creating meaningful moments together.”



From M. Alejandra Gonzalez-Gonzalez

“One of my favorite ways to relax and recharge is spending quality time with my Bengal cat. Whether we’re playing together or simply enjoying a quiet moment, it’s a great way for me to unplug from work, reduce stress, and appreciate the simple things. These moments always bring a smile to my face and help me return to work feeling refreshed.”





In Honor of International Self-Care Day: Make Yourself a Priority



July 24



is International Self-Care Day - a reminder that taking care of yourself isn't a luxury; it's an essential part of staying healthy, resilient, and ready to care for others.

In the middle of busy schedules, endless meetings, deadlines, and personal responsibilities, it's easy to put yourself at the bottom of your own priority list. But self-care doesn't have to mean taking an entire day off or planning an extravagant getaway. Sometimes, the smallest moments can make the biggest difference.

Small Ways to Practice Self-Care During a Busy Day



Take a mindful pause.

Step away from your screen for a few minutes, stretch, take a few deep breaths, or enjoy a short walk. Giving your mind a brief reset can help improve focus and reduce stress.



Protect your time.

Your calendar reflects your priorities. Schedule breaks, block time for focused work, and don't be afraid to set healthy boundaries when your schedule becomes overwhelming.



Stay fueled.

Drink water throughout the day, choose nourishing meals and snacks when possible, and avoid skipping lunch. Taking care of your body helps support your energy and concentration.



Check in with yourself.

Ask yourself, "How am I feeling today?" Recognizing when you're stressed, tired, or overwhelmed is the first step toward giving yourself what you need.



Practice Self-Compassion.

Not every day will go according to plan, and that's okay. Give yourself the same kindness and understanding you would offer a friend. Instead of focusing on everything left to do, recognize that you're doing your best with the time and energy you have. Progress—not perfection—is what matters most.

Remember: You Matter, Too

Many of us spend our days supporting colleagues, patients, students, families, and our communities. While caring for others is meaningful, it's equally important to care for yourself. Prioritizing your well-being isn't selfish - it's what allows you to continue showing up as your best self.

This International Self-Care Day, challenge yourself to do one thing that supports your physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Whether it's taking a walk, reading a book, calling a friend, or simply giving yourself permission to rest, every act of self-care is an investment in your health.

Take care of yourself today - you deserve it. ❤️



Let us know how we did!
**Scan or press this QR code to share
your thoughts!**



If you're interested in wellness or would like to join our wellness initiatives, please contact us at **DOPCC@texaschildrens.org**. We also welcome submissions of wellness tips, stories, and ideas that support well-being and help foster a more connected, supportive environment!



A quote to remember from Lacey Schmidt



***“True self-confidence is the courage to be open—to welcome change and new ideas regardless of their source. Real self-confidence is not reflected in a title, an expensive suit, a fancy car, or a series of acquisitions. It is reflected in your mindset: your readiness to grow.”
— Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success****

