A message from Dr. Peter Yellowlees, Chief Wellness Officer

“We’re all in this together”

“The Support U Peer Responder Program is an incredible opportunity for us to transform our work environment and foster professional well-being. The overarching goal is to reduce the burden of human suffering and address clinician burnout by linking our peers to resources available throughout the health system. This program is one of the most meaningful things that I have done in my career and it is such a privilege to be a part of a program that is fostering coping strategies and promoting individual resilience. Peer support helps us to reconnect and gives us the feeling of solidarity.” – Michelle Linenberger, RN

Transitioning toward the new normal seems weird at times. Most shops are open now but there is a mix of shoppers with or without masks. And nobody knows for sure in the community who is, or is not, vaccinated. Here at UC Davis Health, masks are required in some areas, and not in others. We still have a way to go. Many environments still require masks...keep them handy.

It is normal to feel anxious.

At home…it is normal:
• To let your fear of becoming infected continue to influence your life and your decisions.
• To be stressed by the news media, or angry about our continuing social division.
• To wear a mask at a non-socially distanced meeting, when few others are doing so.
• To have your important relationships affected by mutual stress and isolation.
• To be worried by the idea of going to a cinema, or to a sporting event, especially with your children.
• To have your family split on whether it’s safe to fly or to even plan a vacation yet.

At work…it is normal:
• To be concerned about whether your job will allow you to continue working full or part-time at home post
COVID19.
• To be anxious about physically returning to work.
• To wonder how you will manage childcare as you transition back to in person work.
• To be worried about physical interactions with patients, staff and students, and continuing transmission risks.
• To have thought about changing your job or career for something easier outside of healthcare, or of retiring early.
Or...it is normal:
• To be putting off getting back in physical shape.
• To be concerned about co-workers, friends, or family, who are not doing as well as you are.
• To experience acute or chronic stress as a result of racism, which is now more widely recognized as a structural problem in the country.
• To be still grieving for people who died, or who were very ill, during the pandemic.
• To feel anxious due to stressful or uncertain times.

We are all stressed to some degree, and as we continue to move forward the stressors will wax and wane. It is important to acknowledge the many differing reactions we have all had to the pandemic. As we gradually emerge from our pandemic “hibernation” there are some simple things we can do to help ourselves in future. These are the topics we should be talking about as we start to socialize once more and enjoy each other.

For me, it has been encouraging to hear so many UCD colleagues acknowledge how well we at UCDH have done throughout this difficult time. I want to publicly thank all of you for what you have done for your patients, for your students, for yourselves and your families, and for your community. It has been humbling to watch the extraordinary work done by everyone. All have contributed, whether it is by nursing dying patients in the ICU, to staying at home and reducing the spread of the virus, or to being part of our astonishingly high level of vaccinated staff. In particular, hats off to our amazing staff who managed the very successful vaccination program.

As we move forward, can I challenge you all to make a commitment to continue to look after each other and to continue to be part of a healing community, as you have during COVID19. It’s important to talk about what you have gone through and to seek help when needed.

One of the positives of the pandemic has been the drive to support each other – in local groups and teams primarily. But also, through the development of Support U, our peer responder program, which I would like to specifically call out here.

This program is the brainchild of Michelle Linenberger, RN, an extraordinary nurse educator, who developed the program initially for nursing staff some years ago. During COVID19, Support U has been further substantially developed with the help of Katren Tyler, MD and Lisa Word, as well as a core group of about 20 other staff. We now have over 480 individual staff from all disciplines and backgrounds trained as peer responders, as well as 42 established peer responder teams who can help in stressful group situations. You can identify them by their badge buddies which have ‘Peer Responder’ alongside their professional training role, or contact them at https://intranet.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/pcs/Wellbeing/support_u.shtml.

Support U represents an organizational shift at UCDH that changes the focus of the entire health system:
• From silence to acceptance
• From expected perfection to accepting our human fallibility
• From isolation and shame to a supportive and healing community.

All the peer responders have completed a four-hour training in “psychological first aid” which is an invaluable training component for first responders, and which, in my view, really should be part of the core training of all healthcare professionals. This training teaches us how to look, listen, and connect, and discusses the roles of peer responders, such as the importance of not keeping records of their conversations, which are legally protected and confidential.

Is Support U being effective, and helping to change our culture? The answer is a resounding, YES. We know that during the pandemic over the past year that there have been over 500 individual peer responder interactions, and over 40 team responses. That’s a great deal of listening and helping each other. The number of individual interactions is likely a significant under-estimate because we know that many occur that are not “reported.”

So, let us all give a big “shout out” to all involved in the Support U Program. Especially the peer responders themselves. As Dr. Tyler, says:

“The last 18 months has intensified the burden of working in healthcare. The Support U Peer Responder Program is a critical way that we can offer support to each other in response to difficult and stressful situations in clinical and non-clinical work situations, and in our home lives. It’s not therapy. It’s not formal. It is a
recognition that we have all been there. It is an honor to be part of this program, and I would like to thank Michelle Linenberger for her leadership, vision, and compassion. Join us for our training, keep an eye out for our badge buddies, and reach out for yourself or a colleague. We are happy to listen.”

Thank the peer responders when you see their badge buddies, and approach them if you are distressed or want a listening ear. We have to help each other and move our culture forward so that we become a truly healing community, something of great importance at this strange time. And do think about becoming a peer responder yourself. All staff are welcome, and we will train as many as we can. If you wish to be part of this program please contact us through the feedback button below or just send me an email directly if you would like to have a large number of people from your department or unit trained, as several groups have done.

Remember: “We’re all in this together.”

Cardiology Outpatient Services - ACC
"Everyone was very professional in their service to me. I am looking forward to my next visit and am hoping for a cure to my health problems."

Dermatology Cannery
"Staff are very courteous, friendly and professional. The sense they emote is a joy in working here. Congrats!!"

Ophthalmology Clinic - ACC
"Their team was like a well "oiled" machine. They communicated with each other and with me."

UCD Folsom Mohs Surgery
"The surgery coordinator was very helpful and explained the Mohs surgery procedure and sent me a link to videos. The attending nurse and surgeon were very helpful and caring of my comfort."

Urology Clinic - ACC
"Very courteous and professional staff. I really felt that that my well being mattered to the staff."