How can I keep in touch with colleagues?

Frequently changing roles and workplaces can make it hard to keep in contact with workmates. Abi Rimmer hears some tips on how to stay connected.

Virtual communication is essential
Sabrina Das, obstetrician and gynaecologist with Médecins Sans Frontières in Yemen

“I’m on sabbatical working in Yemen with MSF. Keeping in touch with colleagues from the UK has been vitally important to me as an informal support system.

“WhatsApp messaging and video calls have formed the mainstay of my communication with colleagues. I set up a closed WhatsApp group to post near-daily updates to reassure my friends, family, and colleagues that I am safe and this has helped me have regular connection with the people who care about me.

“I also have a small and trusted group of ‘phone a friend’ specialist colleagues. With the virtual guidance of these experts I’ve been able to perform procedures that I had minimal experience of in my usual UK practice.

“Coming from an international family who live across four different time zones, I’m used to using group chats to talk about things that are often very personal. During my sabbatical, I’ve maintained an emotional connection with friends and colleagues through these virtual methods—following a colleague through her second and third trimesters of pregnancy, giving another advice about exams, and high fiving another who got her audit published."

Have informal check ins with colleagues
Claire Pulford, member of National Association of Clinical Tutors UK Council

“Take some time to reflect on who your colleagues might be and think more widely than your immediate team. Include a range of grades and professional groups. If you have a need or interest why not look for an existing group and, if you can’t find one, invite others to start one with you.

“A professional lifesaver for me has been the ability to connect to other educators, especially the NACT Council group which has provided a stream of interesting ideas, good humour, mutual support, and the power of the ‘hive mind’.

“Try to create some informal space at work to check in with how your colleagues are—it only takes a minute. I want to thank those who have checked in with me—sometimes it’s been the one thing that turned a difficult day into a manageable one.

“Some of the relationships you have with colleagues will last for years—they’ll know what you’re like at your worst as well as your best, during sleepless nights, and maybe before you had expert knowledge or experience. They’ve commiserated and celebrated with you. They may well have known you longer than your partner and will know what pressures doctors face. Long term friendships like this can give you grounding and perspective, and—with luck—will outlast your career.

“Creating and keeping in touch with a network of colleagues is not an optional extra, it’s good personal, professional, and organisational practice.”

Find time for face-to-face catch ups
Nusra Khodabux, specialty trainee year 4 in psychiatry of intellectual disability, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

“As doctors, we spend a large part of our post-university life rotating through different regions and occasionally even different countries. In doing so, our social network undoubtedly expands. Keeping in touch with past colleagues can be challenging but I’ve also found it rewarding.

“From a personal point of view, it’s always been about the quality of the relationships I’ve built with a select number of colleagues as opposed to the quantity.

“Social media have made interactions across geographical boundaries much simpler. I have a few WhatsApp groups with past colleagues where I’m active, and also use likes or comments on Facebook to keep in touch with others while simultaneously maintaining a healthy distance, and not being overly friendly.

“A handful of colleagues have become close friends over time. To maintain these relationships, I’ve found it important to find time for face-to-face catch ups. These may be over coffee or dinner when in each other’s vicinity.

“Social distancing rules have, of course, thrown a spanner in the works.

“Virtual platforms have allowed for online teaching sessions but they’re not optimally designed for regular informal chats between colleagues, which can sometimes be more valuable than the teaching itself.”

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