

Volunteer Today

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In previous articles, I've discussed the definition of success and ways to prepare for a public speaking venue. In this article, I'd like to talk about volunteerism and why it is an essential component of a healthy practice and a healthy life.

You spend much of your day counseling others on how to achieve balance in their lives, but how much time and energy do you spend maintaining your own? One extraordinary way of creating balance in your professional life is to focus some energy on your practice and other energy on donating your time to the community. Yes, it is challenging to pursue your education, create an office, and manage a business (not to mention family commitments). However, you have to remember how fortunate you are to have received this education. You now have the responsibility to give back to others based upon the many gifts you have been afforded. You have the unique opportunity to share fulfillment and joy through giving and serving others, while learning, practicing and embracing traditional medicine.

My personal experience has been that when I have felt stuck, when the qi of my practice was obstructed and I couldn't connect with my joy, patient volume dropped immediately. Instead of staying upset, depressed or frustrated, I have learned how to channel my frustration to create new opportunities, possibilities and connections. One of the chief ways I have accomplished this is through participating as a volunteer in organizations related to the profession of acupuncture and Oriental medicine.

If I am involved and passionate about acupuncture and OM in one arena, I find that it overflows into and influences my other projects. For example, it is invaluable, insightful, and directly rewarding to be involved with your state or national professional membership association. Only through participation with such a group can you keep your finger on the pulse of what is happening around you and influencing you. You not only become aware of issues that might directly affect your practice; you gain the opportunity to influence and support the evolution of this profession. In doing so, you become an advocate for your clients as well as our profession, protecting access to (and coverage for) your services. Through interaction with your colleagues, you may gain wisdom from their experience. This allows you the possibility of working together in a group that supports acupuncture and Oriental medicine instead of promoting just your own image and reputation. You will be connected to what is happening in your state politically, economically and legislatively.

Involvement with professional organizations is akin to owning a map before exploring new territory. It's an essential part of understanding where you are and where you might be going. Involvement has the added advantage of allowing you to play a role in the growth, development and evolution of your own profession. You may say, "Where will I find the time?" or "I don't want to be in politics" or "I can't make a difference," but please don't complain unless you are doing something to make it better. Take steps to become more involved, to expand your participation in the very profession which you have devoted so much time and energy to learn and share.

If a professional organization does not appeal to you, consider community service outreach. Every

health practitioner has much to gain through donating time and professional skills to the needy and less fortunate. If we do not always receive monetary reimbursement for our services but share our skills out of caring and commitment to the community, we begin to cultivate and nourish a humanitarian spirituality. This is not to say that you aren't caring or committed in operating your private practice, but there is a deeper fulfillment and incredible reward through service on this level.

Sharing your professional services freely is food for the soul. Like walking in the forest or practicing qi gong on a mountaintop, it supports your vitality. Many groups will welcome your time and professionalism. Hospices, local AIDS foundations, and drug addiction and detoxification centers are good possibilities. You can explore many possible outreach opportunities in your geographic area based upon your interests and areas of specialty.

Of course there are countless other ways of donating time and energy, such as getting involved with local youth sports teams or offering services to the elderly. You could also sponsor a free or discounted clinic by offering free treatment to one or two patients in great need, patients with chronic pain who may be suffering end-stage disease. I have found that offering pain relief and improved quality of life to individuals suffering terminal illness is profoundly rewarding.

In my experience, my practice has increased in volume and expanded proportionally to the amount of work I have volunteered. The more I give, care and share, the more interesting and dynamic my clinic becomes, and the busier I am. It's phenomenal!

Of course, instead of striving to be busier, strive to attain balance and health in your professional practice. A famous psychologist was once asked at a convention, "When a patient comes to you and is suicidal, what do you tell them?" The audience expected to hear him recommend three years of therapy, but instead the psychologist replied: "Leave your house, go to the other side of the tracks, find someone less fortunate than you and do something for them." In other words, when you need to initiate a change for the better, broaden your focus and help those less fortunate. Find the balance between giving and receiving, between what you want for yourself and what you would like for others. Be daring; be adventurous; try something new; broaden your experience and your audience.

Good luck. I suspect you will have as much fun as I have had. Remember, there are countless opportunities. Be creative. Bon voyage!

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