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Pathways to Wellness: Creating a Walking Group to Promote Wellbeing and Connection

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Throughout her career, Jill Valenzuela has navigated the challenges of providing excellent patient care in a constantly evolving healthcare landscape. Recently, she experienced the impact that burnout and stress can have on healthcare professionals. She shares how her personal struggle with burnout helped her recognize the importance of self-care and wellness. In response, she created a walking group for nurses, aiming to foster physical activity and mindfulness, while creating a supportive community to help nurses cope with the demands of their jobs. Her story emphasizes the power of connection and the need for nurses to prioritize their well-being to provide the best care for others.

Celine: Could you provide a brief background about your nursing role?
Jill: Sure! I began my career with UC San Diego Health 30 years ago and currently work as an outpatient hepatology [liver] nurse. In my role, I focus primarily on telephone triage, care coordination, patient education, and providing support to our providers. Care coordination is the most challenging aspect of my work, particularly when it comes to our liver cancer patients. Many of our patients come from low socio-economic backgrounds and have little or no social support. In these cases, we become not just healthcare providers but advocates, helping to remove barriers to care and ensure that our patients receive the support they need. Although I work remotely, I have found that we can still build meaningful, impactful relationships

with our patients over the phone. Through regular calls, I learn about their lives, families, and the struggles they face as they navigate their illness. I strive to give as much as I can in these conversations by listening, learning, giving care advice, and even grieving with them in their moments of loss. It is humbling and incredibly rewarding work, though it can also be emotionally draining. At the heart of it, I am reminded daily of the profound connection we share with our patients and the importance of being present in their health journey. **Celine:** I am sure you have seen so many things changing within the last 30 years. Prioritizing self-care and wellness seem to have been a more recent hot topic amongst nurses. Can you share more about how this became more apparent to the health of your nursing career?



Jill Valenzuela, RN, is an ambulatory care nurse specializing in hepatology with a deep commitment to nurse well-being. With extensive experience in patient care, she is passionate about promoting wellness and preventing burnout among healthcare professionals. She leads guided walks to help nurses reduce stress, build resilience, and strengthen their sense of belonging. Outside of work, Jill enjoys traveling and spending quality time with her family.



Celine Palmiter, BSN, RN, OCN, is a clinical nurse, working with the GI Medical Oncology team at Moores Cancer Center. She earned her BSN from San Diego State University in 2009 and joined UCSDH in 2014. She is co-chair for UCSDH Image of Nursing Council, Principal Managing Editor for the UCSDH Nursing Journal and serves as Program co-chair for San Diego Oncology Nursing Society.



Rose Canyon Walk

Jill: Oh definitely! Self-care and wellness are vital for ensuring the health and well-being of nurses. A few years ago, I went through a period of severe burnout. My work situation was incredibly stressful: COVID, constant staff turnover, departmental restructuring, and relentless project deadlines. On top of that, we transitioned from an office setting to working from home. It was a lot of change to navigate, and it left me feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and powerless. The usual coping mechanisms I relied on no longer worked, and I found myself stuck, unable to “fix” the situation. I am normally an active person, but at the time, I was not leaving the house for days. I could not even muster the energy to take my dog for a walk. I was not myself, and it was hard to admit how far I had fallen. That is when a colleague recommended the HEAR program and I reached out for help. I spoke with a counselor who was incredibly insightful. She helped me understand that my “pot” wasn’t just empty, it had boiled over. I simply could not keep giving because I had nothing left to offer. The counselor emphasized the importance of self-care, something I had been neglecting. I remember thinking, how could I have burnout? I do not have time for this! Accepting that I needed help was tough. As a nurse, I am used to being the one who fixes things. Asking for help felt counterintuitive. But I had to confront that superwoman mindset, realizing that pushing harder was not a sustainable solution, it was just a quick fix that would eventually lead to more harm. What really helped during this time was my friends. They called, checked in, and encouraged me to go on walks with them. I would get up and go, even when I did not feel like it. They kept me moving, kept me going. And my dog was certainly happier too! The truth is, healthcare is evolving, and it often feels like we’re being asked to do more than we can manage. We are all climbing that proverbial mountain, and the summit always seems just out of reach. The key to avoiding burnout is learning to prioritize ourselves first, even though it is hard. We cannot continue to help others if we are running on empty.



Volcan Mountain Hike

Celine: Can you speak about your relationship with fitness/physical activity? How has walking played a role in your self-care?

Jill: Walking is the ultimate form of self-care. It requires us to be fully present, connecting mind, body, and environment. Beyond its physical benefits, walking in nature fosters reflection, mindfulness, and a deeper sense of connection to ourselves and the world around us.

To truly understand my relationship with walking, I need to share my experience with the Camino de

Santiago.

In 2016, my friends introduced me to this 500-mile pilgrimage across Spain. We walked the first 150 miles over 10 days, beginning in France and crossing over the Pyrenees into Spain. The landscape was breathtaking, and the simplicity of the journey was deeply moving. All we had to do was walk, eat, and sleep; free from distractions, focused solely on the rhythm of the steps. It was a tremendous physical challenge, and along the way, I discovered my love for long-distance walking.

Mental and Emotional Wellness:

I like to hike/walk to reduce stress and burnout. But I lack motivation by myself so having a group of people to walk or hike with increases self-accountability. I've enjoyed experiencing the different locations. Places I wouldn't have gone to on my own.

But it was also a profoundly emotional time. During the trek, my father, Poppie, passed away. Being so far from home, away from my family, made it incredibly difficult to cope with the loss. My friends encouraged me to continue walking, and the next morning, as we walked through the fields, they were suddenly filled with bright red poppy flowers. In that moment, I smiled through my tears, feeling connected to my dad in a way I could not have imagined.

That moment became one of the defining reasons I return to the Camino each year. What began as an adventurous walk evolved into a deeply spiritual journey, offering me the time and space I needed to process my grief and honor my father's memory. The Camino, for me, is more than a physical pilgrimage. The walk has become a ritual of healing, reflection, and connection.

Celine: I can understand why you continue to walk the Camino and how it holds a special place in your heart. Can you talk about how this experience alone helped contribute to starting a walking group at UCSDH?

Jill: I want to bring the mindful walking and deep sense of connection I found on the Camino into my everyday life. For me, keeping the momentum has become essential, not only to heal but to support others who may be facing similar struggles.

My intent was to create a space where we could all show up for ourselves and each other, reminding ourselves that sometimes the hardest part is simply taking that first step. Through our shared commitment to walking and self-care, I hoped we could find healing, connection, and a sense of belonging, just as I did on the Camino.

Celine: Outside of physical activity, the social aspect seems to play a large role in this. Is that what you intended?

Jill: Absolutely. The walking group has truly filled a void for me. I grew up playing soccer and continued to play as an adult. Our women's team would meet every Sunday, and it was a regular, grounding part of my routine. But when COVID hit, our team disbanded, and I missed that sense of community and the connection it provided.

Now, I look forward to these regular

Qualtrics surveys were sent to participants to assess their sense of belonging (Table 1) and stress levels (Table 2) before and after participating in the UCSDH walk/hike group events. The results showed a significant increase in participants' sense of belonging, rising from an average score of 5.5 to 7.5 on a 0-10 scale. In contrast, stress levels decreased from an average score of 8 to 5 on the same scale.

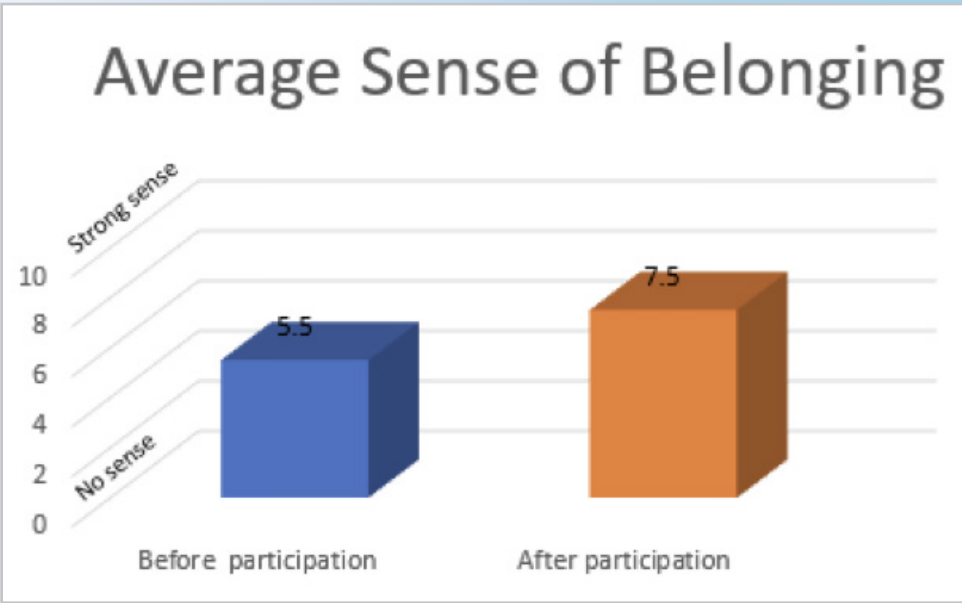


Table 1

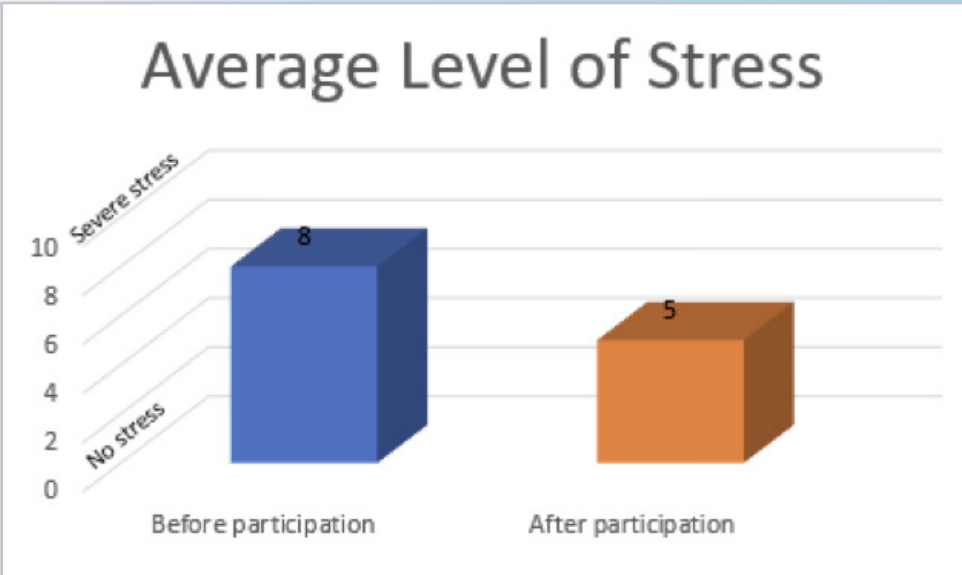


Table 2



Seven Bridges Urban Walk

Building Connections:

Being outside is like therapy. And the others on the walk are friendly and will chit chat if you're up for it. It's wonderful meeting People from other departments with other roles. This idea was truly a gift. And I have been blessed by it.

walks in much the same way. My hope is to build a walking community for nurses—or anyone struggling with burnout. Nursing is demanding, and we work in high-pressure environments that require constant decision-making with little downtime and frequent interruptions. Having a space outside of work where we can get physical exercise, recharge, and connect with others is so important.

It also reminds me that I am part of a larger community, not just a cog in the machine, and that connection is essential for maintaining our well-being, both individually and as a profession.

Celine: Outside of the feeling of belonging, there seems to be many ways that each nurse can benefit from this practicing self-care, which can impact other aspects of their job.

Jill: Yes. Self-care is essential for nurses, as it helps reduce stress, prevent burnout, and support mental and emotional health.

When nurses prioritize their own well-being, they create a more positive work environment, which enables them to offer better patient care and support colleagues. A well-supported, emotionally grounded nurse is more engaged, compassionate, and effective in their role, leading to higher-quality patient outcomes and a stronger healthcare team.

Celine: The group includes nurses across different specialties within UCSDH, can you talk more about the community and collaboration amongst nurses?

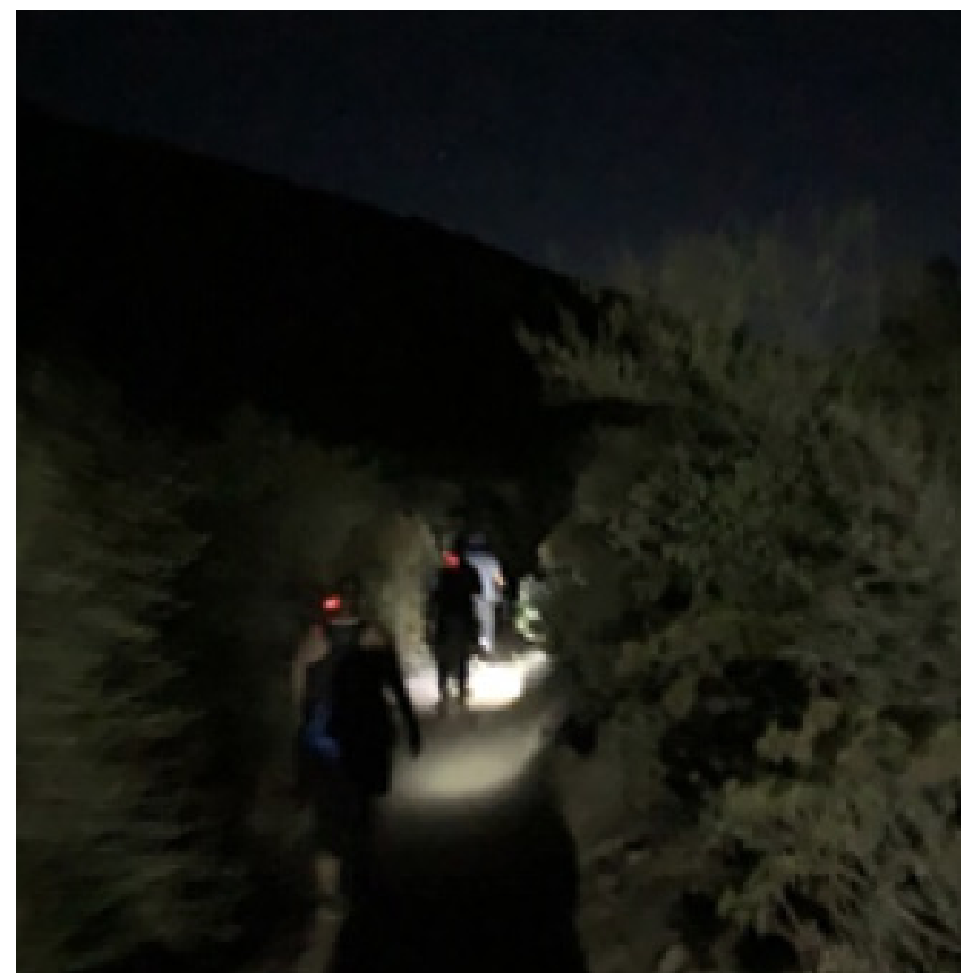
Jill: The walking group fosters community and collaboration amongst nurses by offering a relaxed, supportive environment to connect outside the clinical setting. It provides a space where nurses can share experiences, discuss challenges, and celebrate successes, strengthening trust and camaraderie.

Much like the Camino, where strangers unite through a shared journey, the group brings together nurses from diverse backgrounds, connected by their roles in healthcare or a desire for connection. As they walk, conversations flow naturally, shifting to challenges and passions. This openness sparks networking, idea-sharing, and collaboration, creating a powerful space for growth, innovation, and mutual support.

Celine: When did you start integrating a meal with walking/hiking?

Jill: On a recent trip to Italy with my daughter, I was reminded of the importance of taking time to break bread with friends and savor the moment. I wasn't sure if anyone would want to go out to eat afterward, given how precious weekends and time off are. But what I learned is this: if friends and food are involved, people always find a reason to stay and share.

It also offers a chance to talk and connect with those who may not have walked together on the trail that day. We have discovered some fantastic brunch spots along the way, and let's just say, we're a hungry bunch after a long walk or hike!



Sunrise Iron Mountain Hike

Celine: Have you found that the same group of people keep coming back?

Jill: Yes. We have formed a core group. It is always wonderful to welcome a new member and see familiar faces return.

Celine: Do you find that people are nervous to join if they are not very active?

Jill: Yes, I think some people may feel intimidated by the distance or worry about slowing the group down. We have participants who have never hiked before. Our group includes fast rabbits, slow turtles, and everyone in between! Everyone moves at their own pace, but we all reach the summit together.

Celine: How do you see this group evolving and growing?

Jill: We have 170 members and expect this will continue to grow. We currently offer weekend walks/hikes and are recruiting volunteers to lead events during the week to accommodate our inpatient nursing schedules.

In addition, we are looking to introduce yoga, paddleboarding, and

pickleball to offer something for everyone and keep the momentum going.

Celine: What has been your favorite hike so far?

Jill: The sunrise hike at Iron Mountain. We gathered at the trailhead in the morning and set off with our headlamps in the dark. It was a challenging hike, and everyone pushed through. When we reached the summit, the sense of accomplishment was palpable along with the smiles as we watched the sunrise. These moments together make the effort worthwhile.

Celine: That sounds so lovely. Thank you for sharing your story. It is incredible that you took your own experience with burnout into a powerful opportunity to uplift and support nurses. What advice would you give to nurses about burnout, self-care, and wellness?

Jill: My advice is to take care of yourself first. If we do not prioritize our own well-being, we risk burning out, which affects not only our own health

but the care we give to our patients and the support we offer to our colleagues.

Recognize the signs of burnout and get help. It is easy to dismiss feelings of exhaustion or frustration, but it is important to acknowledge when you are feeling overwhelmed, and it is okay to admit that. Burnout can happen to anyone, and it is not a reflection of your abilities or commitment. What matters is taking the time to step back and recharge.

Thank you for interviewing me and allowing me to share about the walking/hiking group. I hope I will see you on the trail soon!

If you'd like to join her group, please email her at jcvalenzuela@health.ucsd.edu. You will be added to the hiking group invite list and receive times and details of upcoming events!