

A Life Checkup

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When was the last time you took an honest look at your life?

With the myriad challenges facing physicians today, it's sometimes difficult to believe that we can effect positive change in our practices, let alone in our lives. Clearly, some things we cannot control, but often we can influence our circumstances and relationships more than we realize.

One powerful first step is heightened self-awareness. Although we all have the capacity for profound self-reflection, most of us only fleetingly and haphazardly glimpse into the depths of our lives, choices and motivations. This lack of self-awareness can be damaging.

As family physicians, we recommend regular checkups for our patients. But when is the last time you took your life in for a checkup? I'm not talking about going to see a therapist or a life coach. When did you last take time out of your busy existence to engage in a deliberate, systematic and honest analysis of the way you are living your life?

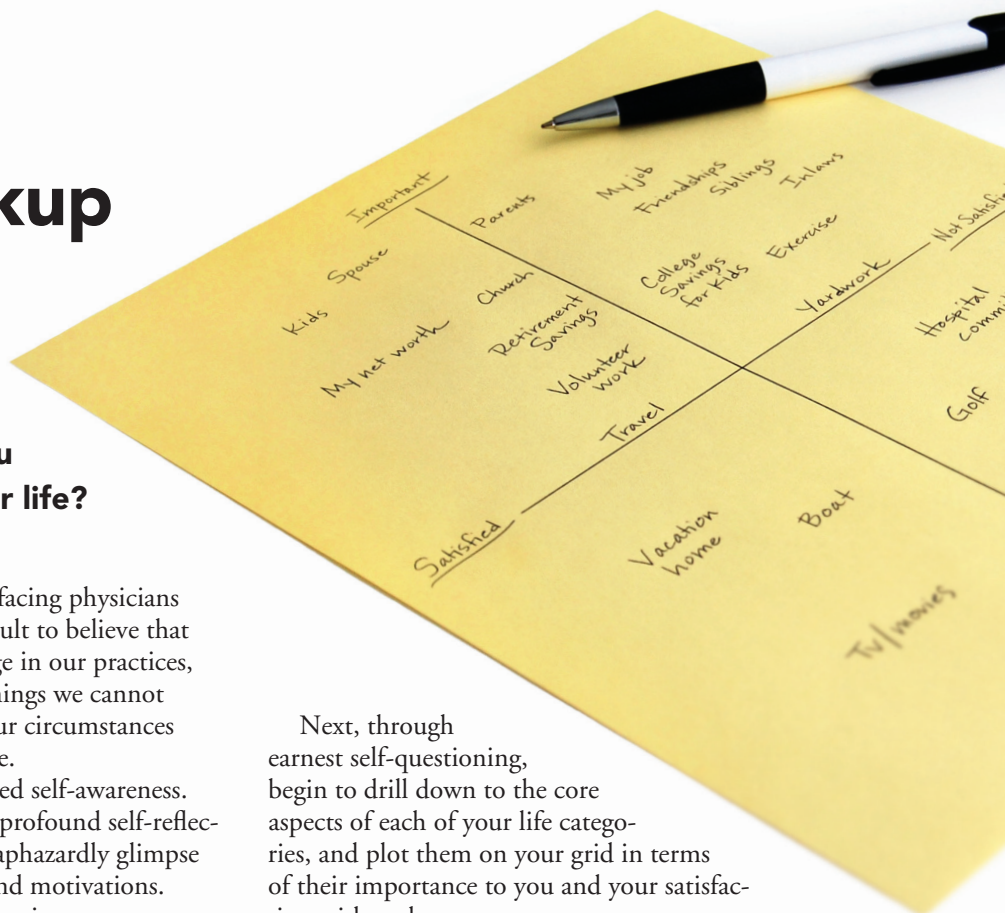
A simple exercise

It may only take a few minutes to bring into focus the aspects of your life that most deserve your attention. Try this exercise: Take out a piece of paper, fold it into quarters and open it up. At the left end of the horizontal fold write "Satisfied," and at the right end write "Not Satisfied." At the top of the vertical fold write "Important," and at the bottom write "Not Important."

Now, think about all of the broad categories that make up your life – family, health, career, social life, leisure time, finances, community engagement, spirituality, etc. For each of us, these categories will be different.

About the Author

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Next, through earnest self-questioning, begin to drill down to the core aspects of each of your life categories, and plot them on your grid in terms of their importance to you and your satisfaction with each one.

To illustrate, let's use the example of family, which might have the following core aspects:


Significant other or spouse. How is your relationship in terms of communication and intimacy? Do you regularly spend time together engaged in activities you both enjoy? Do you too often take each other for granted?

Children. How do you relate to your children? Do you know what is going on in their lives? Do you eat meals together regularly if your kids still live at home?

Parents. Do you have aging parents in need of assistance? Do they live nearby or far away? Are you helping them? Are they afraid to ask for help?

Siblings, step-siblings or in-laws. Are you in touch with them regularly? If not, why not?

There are no right or wrong answers, just authentic ones. You will likely identify aspects of your life for which you are grateful. You may also find that you are dissatisfied with important parts of your life or spending too much time on things that are not important to you. Write down specific changes you can make, and then repeat the exercise in a few months.

By thinking about each aspect of your life in a diligent and systematic fashion, and exploring and wrestling with the major issues on a regular basis, you will move toward having a more meaningful and healthy life. 

Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org.