

Add a Little Spice for a Healthy Retirement!

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As more “Baby Boomers” plan their retirement, many are faced with some fear of the unknown. While some individuals will explore additional employment or volunteer opportunities, others may focus on travel or leisure activities that they previously found little time to pursue. However, for those who have made no specific plans, retirement may create a void that can lead to boredom, loneliness, or depression. In particular, the outlook for retirement may create mixed emotions for individuals who have devoted their lives to helping professions such as education, counseling, health care, recreation, and social services. They still seek some productive and rewarding activity to fill their time and utilize the passion that first drew them to their careers. Such activity is certainly a critical ingredient for maintaining one’s mental health and fitness as we age.

The Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree program at Anderson University in South Carolina, USA, is a relatively new educational program in a faith-based institution that has a strong service mission. As with all graduate, professional programs, our DPT program follows a very rigorous and challenging curriculum plan that creates a great deal of stress for students. One mechanism we created to help cope with this stress is our “SPICE of Life” program. This term is commonly used to describe a variety of experiences that enrich our lives (i.e., “adds flavor”) and makes us more well-rounded individuals. In our program, “SPICE” is actually an acronym which stands for “Senior Partners In Clinical Education.” This program pairs a retired individual from the local community with each student in the DPT program to serve as a lay mentor and guide. These mentors provide students with feedback as they practice newly learned skills, encouragement as they prepare for a career in the health professions, and spiritual support as they struggle with the intensity of the educational process. The primary goal for the SPICE partners is to actively participate in the formative years of a developing health professional and, through that mentoring process, create a meaningful and satisfying relationship. The students benefit greatly from having constructive feedback from an older adult to bridge the gap between classroom learning and clinical practice. Not only does working with a SPICE partner allow the students improve their knowledge and attitudes toward working with older adults, but also, it allows them to begin stepping into the role of being someone’s physical therapist before they start the clinical part of their training. For most seniors who participate, this interaction also provides a mechanism for them to “give something back” to their profession and their community.

Senior partners are prepared for their role via an extensive screening and orientation process. Screenings include questionnaires to determine their availability and commitment to the program’s philosophy. In addition, we conduct screening tests for balance and cognitive status. The orientation session includes introductions, personality profiles to share with their student, a discussion of generational differences and preferences, and troubleshooting tips.

Once they are paired with their student, the role of the senior partner includes:

- Weekly or biweekly phone calls or text messages to offer encouragement and support for stress relief;
- Monthly or bimonthly face-to-face meetings, preferably over lunch;
- Availability if students wish to practice newly learned skills such as taking a medical history, measuring vital signs, assessing home safety, balance screening to assess fall risk, and fitness testing to determine exercise needs;
- Sharing faith-based discussions if student requests it; and
- Participation in student’s celebratory events/accomplishments such as the blessing ceremony during orientation week and attendance at the students’ white coat ceremony, capstone project presentation, and graduation.

In addition, several Spice partners have role-played patients for the students’ practical exams in courses that teach clinical skills. This creates a more realistic testing scenario which students take more seriously. Although the program is still in its inaugural phase, the DPT students and Spice partners agree that it has had several other beneficial effects for both parties including helpful feedback on their communication and handling skills, improved confidence, and a feeling of mutual support, particularly during the recent COVID pandemic.

Planned outcome measures for the “SPICE of Life” program include changes in students’ stress-coping skills, student attitudes towards working with geriatric clients, and senior partners’ ratings of students’ professional behaviors. Open-ended comments on program benefits will also be solicited from each group including how it affect the mental health of the senior partners. Finally, the DPT program plans to track the number of graduates who choose employment in geriatric facilities and/or seek specialty certification to work with this segment of the population.