

How I Maintain Resilience in an Era of Physician Burnout Learning Resiliency Through Humility: A Runner's Story

George Goucher, MD
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

I was never a runner by choice, but coaches from my primary sport demanded that we showed up to the season in shape and so for my teen years autumn was spent on trails along rivers and forests with my school's cross country team. Years of injuries that had worn down my meniscus, ligaments, and tendons coupled with a congenital heart condition meant long distance running was not something that came easily or without pain for me. Through these experiences I learned resilience through humility.

While it's also been rewarding, Urology residency has similarly been a long and challenging experience. I train at a clinically busy centre where I am exposed to a wide range of patients, clinical scenarios and operative diversity, but this busyness means that it can be physically demanding. I am privileged to work with patients who are sick, afraid and sometimes at a loss, this can also be emotionally difficult. Maintaining resilience throughout these demands can be a challenge.

The first lesson I learned was to be good to your body. Training to run you learn to pace yourself so as not to crash and burn early and similarly the five years of residency have been a lengthy trail to run on. When running I had to listen to my body; to make sure I trained regularly but also that I didn't injure myself through overexertion. To differentiate between soreness in my muscles and grinding along my joint lines suggesting my weekly distance counts were riding high. As a resident I've had to not only push my body, but also accept the physical limitations I have. I can't work an eighty hour week and then pack my free time with scheduled activities, sometimes sleeping, eating healthy and rest need to be prioritized.

Although many people consider running an individual sport, in training to be a runner I had to learn to be good to my team. When my motivation struggled, it was my team mates who could continue to push me; to show up to practises when I felt exhausted, to encourage to push harder and how to be successful. I in-turn became someone who could help them achieve their best. We are fortunate in residency that our program feels like a team, competing against the many challenges we face in becoming surgeons. Our teammates, and often our coaches or surgical mentors can provide us that critical feedback needed to improve. In my tough rotations, it has been my peers and mentors who have really showed me how to survive and then how to thrive. Humility has allowed me to accept their help when I needed it.

I am a naturally competitive person and have many other athletic accolades that would suggest that I've been successful at least some of the time, but this was not the case for running and this was not easy. I would hate to be passed or be unable to catch up to the advanced runners, and this led me to meet my biggest critic: myself. To be good at running I had to learn to be good to yourself; and accept that I was still a work in progress and to be proud of what I could accomplish. One of the challenging parts about residency is that I am not yet the surgeon I aspire to be, and it's very easy to be mad at myself for that. Humility has allowed me to accept where I am now, but resilience has reaffirmed that I am going to keep working until I get where I want to be.

While many of the endeavors I was successful at growing up helped me develop confidence I've used in my career, it was my struggles as a runner that showed me what humility meant. I continue to draw on these experiences as I navigate residency. Humility taught me that I needed to be good to my body, needed to be good to my team and good to myself in order to be successful in challenging times. These are the attributes have helped me maintain resilience throughout the trials and tribulations of being a surgical resident and will hopefully continue to serve me throughout my career as a Urologist.