

How I Maintain Resilience in an Era of Physician Burnout

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“Urology residency was a walk in the park,” said no urologist *ever*. I was never promised this journey would be easy, nor would I want it to be. It is meant to be incredibly challenging. It attracts supremely motivated aspiring genitourinary surgeons that welcome the vigorous demands of surgical training. This unique mentality preserves our elite society of talented, yet humble, urological surgeons and keeps our great field marching forward with a strong, steady cadence.

The 2016 AUA Census polled over 2300 urologists finding a burnout rate of 41.3% in the 29 to 65 year old age range.¹ Further, 65% of surgical residents met the criteria for burnout.² Our field should foster a generation of gritty, resilient urologists—those who grind, embrace the struggle, then rise and overcome, despite heavy but fair demands in our training curriculum. Given this simple truth, resident burnout should not be shocking, nor should it be considered essential for professional growth or believed to be a “rite of passage” in order to achieve the ranks of “attending-hood.”

After military service, world travel and unnecessary graduate school, two things are true. First, I am old. Well, at least for a third year urology resident. Second, my tangential path to residency has allowed for more opportunities to gain life perspective and learn coping mechanisms. That is at least what I tell myself.

Who wouldn't feel the physical and mental effects of not sleeping for days on end? Who wouldn't get a little overwhelmed driving back and forth to the hospital at 4am to tend to emergent patients? Who wouldn't panic knowing that we need to do it all? Read journal articles, be assaulted with questions at academics, “wow” our patients with our bedside manner, be ready to operate at any time and make essay contest submissions sound eloquent? No one. Add to that the personal responsibilities; no one wants to disappoint their significant other, neglect their spouse or miss putting their children to bed. But it happens to everyone, and hopefully by sharing some of our survival strategies we can help the community function better as a whole.

Everyone handles stress differently and what “works” for me might not help anyone else. This is not a personal cookbook to avoid hard work. On the contrary, it is my recipe (in on particular order) to ensure that I operate at my highest potential.

Sweat it out. Leave your car home and run to work. Force yourself to move your feet. Runners high is real. Breathing fresh, non-hospital air is more helpful than you can imagine. Try meditation. Download an app. Be a little selfish. Learning to say “no” will actually make you function better. Creating little pockets of “me time” allow me to step away for a moment and come back to work brighter, more energized, and dare I say, happier?!

I am sure that everyone will say “eat well”. Fueling your body with proper nutrition will give you more energy and this will equal better results. So I'll say it too. Eat well (he writes as he scarfs down a greasy cafeteria burrito for dinner). Sometimes, three square meals a day is a luxury that we don't have. Sometimes we must subsist solely on cool ranch Doritos and Monster energy drinks. My advice? Try to eat something green every few days to balance it out.

Most importantly, don't take yourself too seriously. Grow a horrible mustache for Movember. OK, I know, we're surgeons--it's serious--life and death stuff. We must take the *job* seriously. Study the procedures, put in lab time, know your stuff in the OR, but when you *do* get that rare weekend where you're not on call, and you've spent an entire Saturday catching up on sleep, spend Sunday goofing off. Yes, I said it. Be silly. Do something pointless and

fun for you and your loved ones. They'll appreciate it more than you realize. Put work aside for a brief moment and act like a fool. (And then pick up your manual and do some in-service exam practice questions).

And if all else fails, and you find yourself driving back to the hospital for the third time in a single call night at 4am, there's nothing wrong with rolling down the windows and screaming out your frustrations at the top of your lungs. It's cathartic. You should try it--just not in the middle of a residential neighborhood where someone is likely to call the cops on you. Trust me on that.

References:

1. North AC, McKenna PH, Sener A et al: Burnout in urology: findings from the 2016 AUA annual census. Urol Pract 2018; doi:10.1016/j.urpr.2017.11.004.
2. Elmore LC: National survey of burnout among US general surgery residents. J Am Col Surg 2016; 223:440.