



Association of Women Surgeons

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Effective Management of Stress, Fitness and Nutrition during a Surgical Residency

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If you're a surgical resident you've probably figured out by now that you have a type A personality. You think you can manage everything, all of the time, right? But as you look back on yourself after your first year of residency, you see a few more grey hairs, a few extra pounds and your daily diet consisting of ramen noodles or fries from the hospital cafeteria. After all that, you may come to the realization that you've lost sight of your personal well-being.

As you know residency is only one step in the seemingly endless climb through medical school, residency, fellowship on the way to becoming an attending surgeon. All of these positions require your devoted attention, time, and effort. Putting off your personal health and wellness will be a never-ending battle if you don't make a change now. There is no time like the present to start making time for stress management, health and fitness. The key to sustaining your career is a well-balanced life style.

Let's start with stress management. Stress is no stranger to a surgical resident, it's what keeps us awake on late nights and drives us to study harder for M&M conferences. But, at times stress can become debilitating and interfere with our performance at work. In a study of American College of Surgeons (ACS) members addressing stress and burnout, male surgeons were found to be at lower risk than females for burnout.¹ Does this surprise you? Many women now juggle their career, management of a household and raising children. The first step to combating stress is becoming aware of the stressors in your life and how you cope with them. Poor coping mechanisms may be the root of the problem. Here are some common healthy methods used to cope with stress.

1. Protecting time away from work with spouse, family, and friends.
2. Confide in your co-workers, they likely have the same feelings that you do.

3. Meet with a counselor, psychologist/psychiatrist, most residency programs will provide one, and this is used more commonly than you might think. Depending on your program, meeting with a counselor should remain confidential and free of your record.
4. Engaging in contemplative or mindfulness practices (e.g. meditation, journaling, etc.)
5. Take relaxing vacations, don't feel obligated to visit the in-laws or work on your research projects with your free time.
6. Learn to say "no;" you can't do it all, don't accept additional tasks you can't handle.
7. Time management.
8. Adjust your standards. Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress.
9. Focus on the positive. When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life.
10. Most importantly find time for relaxation every day. Whether it is 10 minutes before bed, or a moment of meditation in the morning before you start your day, take time to reflect, focus and relax.

This leads us to our number one stress reliever, aerobic exercise. A study conducted of ACS members found that quality of life was superior for those surgeons who had higher levels of aerobic exercise.¹ Finding time to exercise during residency is easier said than done, but it can be accomplished. Start with just 30 minutes of exercise 3 times a week. Make a calendar for yourself. Add 30 minutes of exercise into your schedule on evenings and days you are not on call. Find a gym or aerobics class near your home, preferably on your route back from the hospital so you will be more likely to stop. Sign up for work out classes, spinning, yoga, circuit training, etc. Many of these classes will be less than an hour and allow for some much needed social time as well. If your rotation is so hectic that you find yourself getting home after 10 P.M. every night and leaving early from home, you may have to adjust to in-home workouts. Many residents enjoy an early morning 30 minute yoga session, on their mat in their living room. There are a plethora of work out tapes that include aerobic and strength training that can be done in less than 30 minutes at home in the evening before bed or first thing in the morning (I prefer P90X or "insanity training"). Most people find that the more exercise they get the more energy they have during the day, as well as an improved mood.

Nutrition goes hand in hand with exercise and living a balanced lifestyle. Healthy eating often goes by the wayside during residency either from a lack of time to eat the right things, or lack of funds to buy healthy foods on a small budget. I have found during my training that there is often not time to even make it to the cafeteria during a day. Often residents have a power bar for breakfast, abstain from eating all day, then binge on a burger and fries on their way home at the local fast food joint. Here is a list of ways to maintain a healthy balanced diet in residency:

1. Avoid excessive caffeine and sugar. The temporary "highs" caffeine and sugar provide often end in with a crash in mood and energy.
2. Chances are if it comes in a package it's not very nutritious, try to buy or prepare fresh foods whenever possible.
3. Try to find the discipline to pack a lunch each day with several easy and quick snacks. You may not have time to make it to the cafeteria but if you have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or apple in your purse then you can have lunch between cases.
4. Make smart choices in the cafeteria; opt for fruit and lower calorie foods.
5. Avoid the easy grabs: donuts, pizza, and the endless birthday cakes in the lounge.
6. Always carry a large bottle of water in your purse, refill frequently, and stay hydrated. Cut out the sodas.
7. Protein bars and shakes are an easy way to get in a healthy breakfast and can be eaten in the car on your way to work.
8. Cooking is a wonderful stress reliever, try it.
9. Choose healthy meals when you eat out.
10. The key to eating healthy is planning. Plan a menu for yourself and prepare meals in advance.

Remember that physicians that practice a healthy lifestyle are more likely to encourage their patients to do so. So stay healthy for your patients and yourself!

References:

1. Shanafelt TD, Oreskovich MR, Dyrbye LN, et al. Avoiding burnout: the personal health habits and wellness practices of US surgeons. *Ann Surg.* 2012;255(4):625-33.