



Association of Women Surgeons

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Wellness: Personal Life

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With long hours in the hospital followed by studying or working on presentations at home, time becomes the main limiting factor in your life as a surgical resident. Therefore, you may find your personal life falling by the wayside. In fact, sometimes you forget there is a life outside of work and this perception may have started in medical school. I remember that my non-medicine friends stopped inviting me to events altogether because I never made the effort/had the time to attend. As a surgeon, we can cut to the chase and eliminate the excess easily, but family, friends, and personal health should not be neglected.

It is difficult to find time to spend with other people because on your 4 days off per month you are probably catching up on sleep. However, if you don't incorporate maintaining bonds with family, friends, or your spouse into your routine, you may find yourself all alone.

Here are some tips that may help with scheduling time for you:

- Try to take 1 true day off per month. No studying, no chores, no stress. Watch TV, get a manicure, go shopping, go out with friends, participate in your favorite hobby, read, cook, enjoy life (yes it's possible☺)
- Consider outsourcing certain tasks you don't have time for such as cleaning. If you can afford it, you may try to pay for someone to clean your house, do your laundry, mow your lawn, wash your car, etc. Better to pay someone than try to fit this into your post-call day.
- Work in family, friend, and spouse time. Use technology to your advantage. Skype, Face Time, email, and text are all great ways to stay connected and drop people a line every now and then. Your family may think you died. You're not dead, you are now just a surgery resident (even if you feel dead a lot of times).
- Romantic relationships can be difficult. Now you have less time for yourself and everyone else. Having an understanding, supportive partner is crucial. Now more than ever, you don't have time for drama so don't feel bad about cutting bait if you're in a bad relationship. Long distance relationships can be very difficult as traveling is limited with your busy schedule. Let your partner know your schedule early (especially if your significant other is not in medicine).
- Make a schedule. (Especially if you are single and don't have someone doing this for you.) A lot of my co-residents have wives that set up their doctor's appointments and go to the bank for them. You will be flipping from nights to days from q3 call to q2 call over a weekend. What the

heck is going on? When is my rent due? Automate everything you can in your life, so you can worry about the more important things. Thank goodness for Web-pay. Sometimes it doesn't hurt to put a calendar with important dates highlighted on your refrigerator (or if you don't see your refrigerator much, above your bed).

- Be flexible. Most of us are psychotic planners and overachievers, but life happens. Or more like Forrest Gump popularized, "Sh*t happens". Your life and schedule will never be 100% predictable, but like a good surgeon, have a contingency plan and keep on going.

Spiritual/Psychological Wellness

Again don't forget to nurture your inner core/spirit/soul (whatever word you may use). Incorporating prayer or meditation into your daily routine for just 15 minutes can be a potent form of stress relief. Pray, meditate, day dream, or do yoga. While the world is circling around you faster and faster, remember what it is that keeps you centered.

Sometimes our jobs can be exceedingly stressful. Certain cases are etched in my brain forever and I bet many surgery residents can have forms of PTSD from the things we experience. I have had so many talks with families where I hear people tell me "I broke their heart." I sometimes go home and can't escape the vision of the patient that I just lost. It is good to talk about these events and other stresses. Don't keep things bottled inside and always try to have a network of people around that you can trust.

Pregnancy

The average medical student graduates at 28 and the typical chief resident is 32. Obviously, prime child-bearing years overlap with residency especially surgical training which can last from 5-8 years. More surgical residents are having children during residency than before, but the majority of women in surgical training do not. Many reasons exist for this. Obviously having a baby is a personal decision and you should not be deterred if residency is the right time for you. Sadly in surgery, the stigma of a pregnant resident has not changed much (Turner et al. 2012). In general, women in surgery tend not to have large families, have children later in life, and more than half of women wait until after training to have children (Turner et al. 2012).

If you decide to have a child in residency, the most important thing to have is support from your family. Having support from your program also helps immensely. There are some programs that have a malignant reputation towards women and these programs would likely be challenging for a pregnant resident. Obviously, surgical training is rigorous and it is difficult to take care of yourself. It is even more difficult to take care of yourself while being pregnant without the appropriate support system. In speaking to my friends in surgery who have had children in residency, preparation is key. Factors to consider include but are not limited to: physical demands, inherent work hazards (radiation, exposure to dangerous substances), financial considerations, child-care considerations, program culture, year of training (i.e. applying for a fellowship, call/rotation schedule), etc. Some women try to coordinate pregnancy with their research year. Maternity leave and the amount of clinical time you may miss

should be worked out before-hand if at all possible. Also consider obtaining pregnancy-related disability insurance. The Association for Women Surgeons has a [statement on pregnancy](#) and your rights on their website.

As difficult as it may seem, living a well-balanced life is possible. Rejuvenating relationships with friends and family and becoming familiar with activities that you enjoy or find relaxing is the key to finding that balance. Your personal life matters so highly that it effects you as a person and a surgeon, so remain dedicated to taking care of both you and your patients.

Reference: Turner et al. Pregnancy among women surgeons. 2012. Arch Surg. 147(5): 474-479.