

## SURVIVING YOUR CAREER

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The health profession has historically been a male-dominant arena and hence male values have prevailed such as bravery, courage, intellect and sacrifice. Emotions such as love, fear and anxiety were considered weak and were rarely demonstrated. Health professionals are often described as high achievers; classically removed from nature, married to work, adrift from family and friends, spiritually starved, sleep deprived, physically unfit, enslaved to debt and working to maximum capacity. Occupational stress and burnout can be attributed to these characteristics. Although working conditions in Medicine have improved vastly over the last half century and particularly last decade it is still a stressful environment. Difficulties at home such as poor financial planning, marriage difficulties and child responsibilities may trigger a synergistic deterioration in the individuals work environment and at worst endanger their lives. The fallout may be unintentionally brought to the workplace which may then be perceived as an undesirable or unpleasant environment because it becomes the place the non-work related problems are processed. As this is where the majority of the waking hours are spent, a dysfunction domestic life can make work a stressful and unpleasant place. Physically once a personal threshold is passed a long term stress response occurs, essentially a bombardment of the sympathetic nervous system resulting eventually in a plethora of ailments which may then cause psychological disturbances. In any given year six percent of adults will experience two or more weeks of depressive symptoms which will interfere with their ability to function effectively, considerably more people report mild states of low mood or anxiety.

Maintenance of personal equilibrium invariably ranks as the lowest priority in an overcrowded life and burnout may rapidly ensue including sub par job performance, errors, loss of confidence, dysfunctional or erratic behaviour, depression, substance abuse and ultimately the loss of a valuable resource – the health professional. For a practitioner a complaint, which will be experienced by many, is acknowledged as one of the most stressful events in a medical career and often completely reshapes future practice. The emotional ramifications and health toll can be enormous requiring immediate prophylactic intervention, concentrating on enjoyable distracting activities to maintain normal mental function to mount a positive defence, whilst avoiding the associated 40% incidence of depression and possibly even suicide.

Surviving your career and achieving personal fulfilment requires major restructuring that cannot be prescribed with an intervention formula. Every individual has a personal internal gauge, for when they are ready to deal with a critical life issue. The most immediate goal for the individual is to re-establish some modicum of control where there is little or none, and this requires change. Mobile phones, email and text messaging make the separation of work and home life difficult as there are almost no hours in the day anywhere that a doctor is truly inaccessible. It is easy for this career-centric lifestyle to define a physician and although the long hours spent healing may be immensely satisfying, few doctors spend enough time preventing or repairing the damage caused by the stressors of a poor work-life balance.

An individual's feelings of well-being can only easily be improved by happiness enhancing activities. These need to be carefully chosen by the individual for maximum enjoyment and the satisfaction of achievement. Attainable goals only must be set, the activities initiated, maintained and if possible regularly varied for maximum duration of effect. The mechanisms that regulate behaviour were shaped for an entirely different environment of short term goals required for daily survival, thus people experience a positive affect when they achieve a goal faster than expected but they experience negative effect or even decreased motivation when goals appear to be slipping away. The size and duration of modern goals particularly in medicine are often several orders of magnitude larger, resulting in individuals persisting in the pursuit of hopeless unwanted goals creating situations that disengage motivation and promote depression. Making time for these happiness activities, working on important life goals that are possible, looking on the bright side and making a habit of it is important. When there is sufficient time, energy and resources to successfully pursue all current goals without compromise, life is good as the brain runs on fun.

In a world of burgeoning information medicine is a career that continually requires physicians to know more, to demonstrate continual professional development and be more accountable besides being a business person,



partner and financial manager. This is often compounded by holding office and community service. At the end of the day, this makes it very difficult for doctors to find time to be a parent, partner, carer or friend let alone time for hobbies or sport. Regular scheduled family time plus ascertaining what they need most from you is suggested. In addition to pursuing happiness enhancing activities, life style choices to improve brain chemistry are often suggested. There are benefits from getting to bed and to sleep by 2230 whenever possible. On average seven to eight hours sleep are required each night, less than this causes emotional liability, reduced ability to concentrate or think in a crisis and contributes to premature aging. Two consecutive uninterrupted eight hour nights of sleep following even prolonged deprivation such as during a weekend on call fully restores the deficit. Sleeping in periodically however is thought to have detrimental effects. Laughter, sex, aerobic exercise and pleasant thoughts produce endorphins and also stimulate the immune system induce new neuronal connections and improve memory. Relaxation, meditation, spirituality and exercise boost serotonin levels which elevates mood.

Regular time off the treadmill for short periods for personal enjoyment without trying to achieve anything concurrently, such as listening to music is important; avoid reading that important journal article. Regular short holiday breaks also avoid excessive introversion and allow time to assess the situation with an open rested mind whilst considering the 'good fortune' of life. A support system including house cleaner, babysitter, gardener may be required (if this is a passion only do the good bits). Develop the art of delegation and accept that some things are just not going to get done today or perhaps that it won't be done to perfection. Make a few close life enriching friends, see them regularly and reduce involvement in social activities that are unfulfilling - don't talk medicine. Always have something no matter how small to look forward to outside work such as holidays and personal projects. Avoid workplace 'tidy up' weekends unless on duty. Make every effort to always be pleasant and wherever possible make other people happy. In potentially unpleasant circumstances, stop assess the issues, then engage in a positive neutral manner to diffuse the situation and remove the stress.

There are possibly lessons to be learned from the most recent population grouping described, now engaging the workplace, namely those born between 1982 and 1992. For "Generation Y" their career isn't everything. They believe in their own self worth, are financially and tech savvy, expect to have several jobs and have high personal expectations. They want flexibility and the ability to do part-time work especially when they become parents. There is a high value placed on self fulfilment. Work-life balance isn't simply a buzz word; they are committed to making their career accommodate their personal and family life. Ultimately to achieve a happy work-lifestyle balance to survive their career physicians need to develop happiness routines and make them integral to every day.

