



Use coping strategies and become more resilient

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It is well recognised that the transition period from medical student to qualified doctor is a particularly demanding time. However, the life course of a doctor presents its own challenges of equal or greater significance and the job of a doctor is becoming increasingly difficult (Figley, Huggard and Rees 2013). Evidence for this relates to organisational, system, societal and clinical factors. Specifically: pressure of patient through-put; patient expectations; lack of organisational and social support; increasing isolation - no time to develop teams and communities of practice; and increasingly complex cases and patient co-morbidities. As doctors progress in their career they become increasingly responsible for the coordination of care in response to traumatic events and patient outcomes, while also managing outside pressures. Such factors can lead to an increase in errors (Jackson and Moreton 2013). Errors may be linked to patient diagnosis and treatment, performance of skills and errors in equipment use. Furthermore, the incidence of errors increases along with the amount of sick leave, with the performance of a growing number of doctors attracting scrutiny from the General Medical Council (GMC 2014). The topic of stress management and resilience has therefore attracted a great deal of attention. This 'How to' is a guide to strategies that can be used to relieve immediate physiological stress responses and when practised assist in the development of your resilience.

Resilience involves the ability to be mentally tough, manage cognitive workload, develop strategies for dealing with too much distraction, and knowing when to call for help or support (Mind 2015). The challenge for us as medical educators is to help our students and trainees, enabling us and them to enhance resilience, improve performance and the care of patients. Below are several strategies that can be used to relieve immediate physiological stress responses. Through regular practice of these it is possible to develop a stronger sense of resilience.

1. Mindfulness/meditative breathing

The positive effects of mindfulness meditation (focus on the present moment without judgement) on stress have been well documented (see NHS mindfulness for mental wellbeing, Resource 1) but to fully benefit, the practice of meditation should become a daily habit.

The following, simple, 'box breathing' technique (Figure 1), or diaphragmatic breathing can be done anywhere and in any situation to help balance the autonomic nervous system and focus attention.

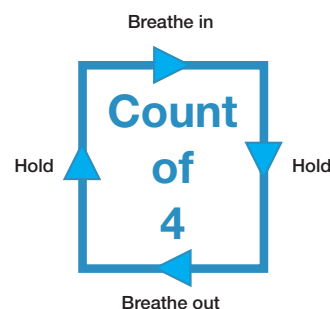


Figure 1: Box-breathing technique

2. Sleep

Top tips for better sleep:

- ▶ Optimise your sleeping position - Use one pillow only and lie on your non-dominant side.
- ▶ Get to know your sleep cycle.
- ▶ Be aware of your natural dipping points (2-4 pm & 1-3 am).
- ▶ Banish blue light - no electronics in the bedroom.
- ▶ Cool your bedroom down.

3. Exercise (7 min app)

The mental and physical benefits of physical exercise are well known. As well as improving sleep, managing stress and improving quality of life, a Department of Health infographic (Figure 2), details the following benefits of physical activity for adults.

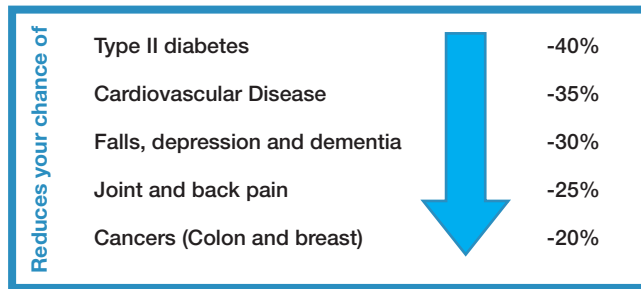


Figure 2: Physical Activity Benefits for Adults and Older Adults, UK Chief Medical Officers' Guidelines 2011

Physical exercise does not require a huge time commitment or special equipment. Klika & Jordan's (2013) 7-Minute workout is a short high intensity, scientifically proven, workout that uses your own body weight and requires no equipment other than a chair.

4. Helicopter Technique

This simple technique can help you gain perspective:

Imagine you are involved in a road rage incident. Now get into your private helicopter and fly up in the air and look down on the incident in your 0-80 year life span. Ask yourself "How important was that incident?" You'll find that generally, it's not important at all.

Try and use this technique when faced with challenging situations at work.

5. Stress bucket

Another simple technique to help you manage your stress throughout the day:

1. Imagine a bucket.
2. While at work imagine filling this bucket with all the stresses you encounter.
3. At the end of each work day empty your bucket using a trigger, such as putting your key in the door or unlocking your bike.
4. Now you have an empty bucket for any home worries.
5. Set a home stress bucket trigger such as brushing your teeth before bed. This way you start the next day with an empty bucket.
6. Repeat daily.

6. Gratitude diary

Research suggests that gratitude can reduce negative emotions and contribute to an overall increase in wellbeing (Emmons and Stern 2013). Gratitude is also linked to increased empathy (Dewall et al 2012). Write down three things that went well for you in the last 24hours. It is a simple yet effective way to focus on the positives of any given day.

Summary

Doctoring is becoming increasingly difficult. While it is recognised that the transition period from medical student to doctor is a period of high demand, it is now becoming evident that doctors of all grades experience equivalent or greater pressures as their role and seniority places them at the forefront of managing traumatic incidents and responsibility for patient outcomes, as well as increasing pressures outside of work. Having a tool kit of strategies to cope with the stress and pressures of work is likely to be useful to physiological and psychological well-being and will contribute to your development of resilience.

References / Further Reading / Useful Resources

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- Figure 1: MayoClinic: Diaphragmatic breathing. Available at: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/decrease-stress-by-using-your-breath/art-20267197?pg=2>
- Figure 2: Department of Health: Physical Activity Infographic. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541233/Physical_activity_infographic.PDF

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