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Learning, Leading and Managing Constant Change: The Proactive Professional

Learning and change are constant in the medical workplace. Professionals must continually develop new skills and new ways of looking at medical knowledge. At the same time, an infinite number of potential stressors can threaten their ability to keep up. Professionals who aim to rise above, not just keep up, are proactive about their personal wellness.

Learning creates dynamic tension

“Learning is inherent to the job,” says Charles M. Balch, M.D., F.A.C.S. “The discovery process going on in medicine is so robust that we are all in constant learning mode.”

Balch is Professor of Surgery and Oncology and Dermatology and Deputy Director, Johns Hopkins Institute for Clinical and Translational Research. He has published research on the topic of physician burnout, including the 2010 *Advances in Surgery* article “Combating Stress and Burnout in Surgical Practice.” (with Tait S. Shanafelt, M.D.)



more and do more can be devastating. “We see physicians experiencing burnout in unhealthy ways—drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, or early retirement,” says Balch.

“Unhealthy responses can also include fractured relationships within families and withdrawal of emotions that leads to decreased compassion and suboptimal patient care.”

Another essential reason to be proactive about preventing burnout is patient safety. “Our research shows that the quality of patient care and medical errors correlates strongly with burnout and depression,” says Balch. “So that is additional motivation to take personal responsibility for wellness.”

The focus of much of Balch’s research is to identify the characteristic risk factors that lead to physician burnout. “We’re learning that many physicians need to be more proactive toward personal wellness, and that this can help them adapt to an inherently

“In the medical field, we accept the responsibility that comes with the constant influx of new technologies and new knowledge,” says Balch. “It’s not something we can ignore.”

“We are all in constant learning mode, and that creates a dynamic tension between the certainty of what we know and the uncertainty of things we ought to know,” Balch says. “We are expected to keep up with the rapidly growing fund of knowledge.”

Adapting comes easier for some than others. “We’re all too familiar with the concept of delayed gratification,” Balch notes. “But putting off our own needs and personal wellness is dangerous.”

Warding off burnout

The consequences of not dealing effectively with a job’s constant pressure to learn

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Learning and Leading Amid Constant Change

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stressful environment. This is especially true for those taking care of seriously ill patients—trauma, cardiovascular or oncology care, for example.”

We all go through various phases of burnout or depression, says Balch. The key is to recognize it when it occurs. “Denial is a common defense mechanism,” says Balch. “Denial and a ‘culture of bravado’ get people into trouble. We can choose instead to work through stressful experiences in a healthy way, without denial as a defense.”

You’re not alone

The incidence of physician burnout, nationally and institutionally, is more prevalent than people appreciate, says Balch. “It’s important for doctors to see that this is a common experience, and they don’t

have to go through it alone. Getting counseling or mentoring can be very therapeutic. Working with a mentor can provide honest feedback and help you stay accountable to healthy solutions to everyday stress. In a med school environment, it can prevent faculty members from getting to the extreme consequences of burnout.”

Striving for balance

One of the things Balch and fellow researchers have learned is that those who strive for balance can have greater satisfaction and joy in their lives. “The equation requires that we work to overcome the pressures that come from taking care of seriously ill patients, bureaucracy in the healthcare system, uncertainty of financing, loss of autonomy, along with family tensions or illnesses. We can do this

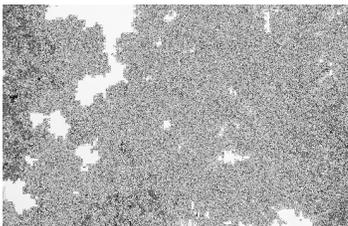
by taking care of ourselves physically and by spending time with our families and outlets beyond work.”

Lead by sharing values

Sharing personal values, not just medical knowledge, is essential for those in a teaching role. “People coming behind us see us as role models,” says Balch. “If they see unhealthy adaptations, they may mimic that behavior. If they see only one dimension, their view will be unrealistic. We should let younger people see not just what we do, but also the underpinning values that drive us. Let them see that we can have a healthy lifestyle and career success too, without cutting corners. They should understand that we are all individually gifted and that each of us gets there in a different way.”

“I tell students in my lectures that success in your professional career at the expense of your personal life is not at all successful.”

-Charles M. Balch, M.D.,
F.A.C.S.



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Resources:

- *Dynamic Tension Between Success in a Surgical Career and Personal Wellbeing: How Can We Succeed in a Stressful Environment and a “Culture of Bravado?”* by Charles M. Balch, MD FACS and Tait S. Shanafelt, MD, Society of Surgical Oncology 2011, Published online 03 March 2011
- *Physician Wellness and Patient Safety*, by Darrell A. Campbell, Jr. MD, Annals of Surgery, Volume 251, Number 6, June 2010
- *Five strategies for physicians to overcome burnout*, by Phyllis Maguire, March 2001, ACP-ASIM Observer, American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine. www.acpinternist.org/archives/2001/03/burnout.htm

Wellness coach tips for getting the competitive edge

For people who are already working at high levels, getting “the edge” means taking better care of themselves, emphasizes executive wellness coach Sam Hester. The author of *Soar to Success Minus the Stress* owns Executive Wellness in Houston. His clients are chief executive officers, physicians, attorneys and other professionals.

“It’s not about doing more—

it’s about *doing less* and *being more*,” says Hester. “When you are already working flat-out, what you need to get to the next level of professional success is not more work. In an environment where everyone is smart and talented, the extra edge can come from better overall wellness.”

To get the wellness edge, “pull back and focus on something

fun,” advises Hester. “Get out of the lab and out of the office. Go outside. Get the large muscle groups moving. You’ll not only feel better, you’ll become more alert and energetic, and you’ll burn off stress hormones and their effects. A change of focus not only increases your ability to handle stress, it also allows creative breakthroughs to happen.”