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What's squeezing the joy out of your life? Resilience tips from an MD who's been there

"Our work is someone else's life," says Sasha Shillcutt, MD. "That is heavy to process. It's hard to go home and act as if nothing happened in the last 10 to 12 hours."

Shillcutt is a cardiac anesthesiologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Anesthesiology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. She has a passion for helping people integrate their work and personal lives. She speaks professionally and authors the blog *Brave Enough*. Burnout, resilience, and self-care are frequent blog topics.

Resilience—More than Survival

"I find resilience is a process by which you're able to sustain forward growth, not just survive," Shillcutt says. "It's a mindset and it requires energy. Resilience is not a stagnant condition, in which

you stand firm and let nothing affect you. Resilient people suffer loss. They feel despair, anxiety and they care about patients. They take action, and use energy to sustain themselves as they move forward."

Resilience is the opposite of burnout, Shillcutt says. "When burnout is hospital-wide or institution-wide, it becomes even more of a problem. There can be decreased patient engagement, lower satisfaction, and financial sustainability issues. Even worse, we know that institutional burnout can cause patient outcomes to suffer."

Burnout is less likely when doctors make an effort to bring positivity into a department, their institution and into patient interactions, Shillcutt says. "I know that can be difficult, because our daily work involves very human and life-changing interactions. We deal with pain, disease, loss and death on a daily basis. To keep a positive perspective, we have to remind ourselves that we went into medicine to take care of patients."

Shifting the Mindset

Shillcutt explains it this way: "I think we each live in a house made up of the words we speak.

Being well is not just avoiding depression and burnout. It's arranging your life in a way that fosters resilience. Looking for the joy you've lost along the way? RAP professionals are here to listen and guide you back.

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That mindset is so important. If you're around negative voices all the time, you remove the life from that house."

After spending time in a negative environment, Shillcutt says she felt isolated and lonely. Her resilient response was to get together with a group of other women physicians.

"We can talk and text each other, and we support one another when someone's going through something difficult. We listen and build one another up with positive messages," she says. "This can change the tone of the whole day. Everyone needs a positive peer group. When you put on the glasses of positivity, it's amazing how much that changes your day. When you can communicate with others who have an open, growth-focused mindset, your reaction to disease, pain and loss is different. You don't go home as empty."

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"I think there are things that we can all do to build resilience in ourselves, but also to build resilience in each other."

- Sheryl Sandberg

Resilience is the opposite of burnout. The good news is that it can be learned.

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Medicine is so hard, Shillcutt says. “People are not coming in because they are well. If you don’t look for the positive you will totally burn out.”

Residency’s Obstacles

The biggest thing doctors in training struggle with is time management and unpredictable schedules, says Shillcutt. “We often don’t know how long our work day will be, and when our day will end. It’s the nature of medicine. While we may intend to wait until the end of the day to take care of ourselves, we’re often too fatigued to invest in self-care. We also come up against the age-old thought that the longer you work, and

In her blog, *Brave Enough*, Dr. Sasha Shillcutt addresses the joys and realities of being a doctor and mother of four. In this excerpt from her May 17, 2017 post, she talks about the importance of being a whole person, all the time. (Used with permission.)

Burnout, in any profession, will steal your empathy and your innovation and well, *you*. You will feel less engaged, less motivated, physically and emotionally exhausted, and start to withdraw. It is a dangerous path and can lead to very costly problems for individuals, institutions, and your family.

Over 50% of physicians report burnout; and the suicide rate is 1.5-2.3 times higher in male and female physicians than the general population. This is a real problem, and one I try and address in my little area of the world.

When I started embracing that my work would flow into home and my home would flow into work, suddenly my work became much more manageable. I’m not promoting a 24/7 work life. I am promoting embracing the fact you are *one*. One person, who is many things. And it is OK to be all of yourself, at all times. My patients and my work colleagues deserve my *best* self; that person is a mom, a wife, and a friend.

When I stopped trying to separate everything, it took a huge amount of pressure off of me professionally. I don’t apologize when I am at work and my child needs me. I also don’t apologize when I am at home and a patient does. And what I have found is that I have developed resilience and respect from my colleagues by being fully *me*.

Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.

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the harder you work, the better you are. That is false. I think that we are still not teaching and valuing self-care as much as we should.”

Making Time for Joy

Shillcutt advises unplugging, even if for 3-10 minutes. “It doesn’t have to be 1-2 hours at the gym. Everyone needs to unplug. Yet it’s very difficult. We’re reading emails and texts, even if we’re not at the hospital. Everyone needs time in the day when they are a person, not a physician. We need to heal ourselves first. That means, though, we have to take something else out of our lives. It might mean hiring someone to do laundry or cleaning, or cutting down on social media time.”

Three years ago, Shillcutt decided to set aside time to keep herself well, resilient and joyful. She did it by going to bed an hour earlier and getting up an hour earlier. “It changed my whole family’s schedule, but it sets an example of wellness for them,” she says. “I use that early morning quiet time to read, meditate, do yoga, or journal. It has made a huge difference. I feel like am in control of my day, whatever it may bring.”

Resources

- *Brave Enough*, blog by Sasha Shillcutt, MD <https://www.becomebraveenough.com/>
- *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, Knopf (2017)
- *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life*, by Eric Greitens, Mariner Books (2016)