

Meeting the Challenges in Year 3 of Medical School

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Challenge #1: Role Transition

First Two Years

- Engage mostly w/material (readings and lectures)
- Little patient contact
- Evaluations conducted using exams
- Little direct scrutiny
- Scheduled evaluations for which you prepared
- Flexible schedule that you mostly create and control

Third Year

- Engage with material and mentors (e.g., residents)
- Frequent patient contact
- Evaluations conducted using exams and feedback
- Significant direct scrutiny
- Some scheduled evaluations, but also unexpected ones
- Structured schedule that is primarily set for you



Tips for Coping with the Transition

- Make necessary time-management adjustments
- Keep self-talk positive and validate yourself
- Seek clarification on expectations, when needed
- Reframe criticism as an act of caring and the critic's effort to advance your knowledge and skills
- Develop a “filter” when dealing with criticism, especially criticism that seems harsh



Specific Advice from Former MS3s

- Set expectations with family and friends, letting them know about your reduced flexibility and how precious your free time is
- Anticipate that your experiences may vary from rotation to rotation, some providing ample opportunity for engagement and some making you feel like you're doing nothing useful and actively being ignored
- Focus on work/life balance so that you're prepared to maintain a healthy personal life in the career to follow

Challenge #2: Avoiding Burnout

- Burnout is a syndrome that includes emotional exhaustion, bitter cynicism, declining sense of accomplishment and a tendency to view people as objects
- Physician burnout is a growing concern
 - A recent survey of 7,000 physicians found that 54% were experiencing at least one symptom of serious burnout
 - 400 physicians commit suicide every year; suicide rate for physicians is more than twice that of the general population and it's particularly great for female physicians



Risk of Burnout Begins in Med School

- Although students enter medical school with mental health profiles similar to their peers, they end up experiencing depression, burnout and other mental illnesses at higher rates
 - “Starting in medical school, there’s a pipeline of experiences that leads to an increased risk of suicide.” – Dr. Thomas Schwenk, University of Michigan
- Despite better access to health care, medical students are more likely to cope by resorting to dysfunctional behaviors like excessive drinking

Burnout Is a Progressive Condition

- Three progressive stages lead to burnout:

Stage 1: Stress Arousal

Persistent insomnia, headaches, irritability, or anxiety; problems concentrating or forgetfulness; more frequent arguments

Stage 2: Energy Conservation

Procrastination, poor charting, skipping meetings, social withdrawal, cynicism, resentment, “drug” use

Stage 3: Exhaustion

Depression, chronic fatigue, isolation, suicidality



Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

- A major contributor to burnout is compassion fatigue
- Generally, caring for patients requires much energy, putting healthcare providers at risk of compassion fatigue, especially given heavy workloads
- Specifically, caring for patients suffering from serious trauma may result in secondary (or vicarious) traumatization for healthcare providers
 - The more empathic the caregiver, the greater the risk of secondary traumatization
 - May even develop symptoms similar to their patients



Impact of Compassion Fatigue

- Compassion fatigue leads to emotional dysregulation, resulting in:
 - **Hyper-arousal** – feeling panicked, agitated, or overwhelmed; risk of overfunctioning
 - **Hypo-arousal** – feeling numb, disconnected, lacking energy, or apathetic; risk of underfunctioning
- Maintaining healthy boundaries with patients becomes more difficult
 - Caregivers may either distance from patients or get too close; latter increases risk of secondary traumatization

Tips for Mitigating Compassion Fatigue and Avoiding Burnout

- Recognize the signs and symptoms; be self-aware
- Identify your stressors (major and minor); change what you can and accept what cannot be changed
- Work at creating a work/life balance, and try to separate work from home
- Accept your limitations and ask for support
 - Sadly, there is evidence that competition in medical school may discourage or even inhibit students from admitting difficulties for fear of being judged
- Attend to self-care and personal wellness



Dimensions of Personal Wellness

- Physical – exercise, proper diet, regular sleep
- Mental – read for pleasure, work crosswords, complete a task you've been avoiding
- Emotional – accept your feelings, keep a journal, have fun and laugh, practice self-compassion
- Social – create/renew a friendship, join a support group, participate in a good cause or charitable event
- Spiritual – read poetry, meditate or pray, practice gratitude, experience awe through nature

PAS: A Resource for Support

- Brief, confidential counseling services
 - Individual, couple, and family counseling
 - Six (6) FREE sessions per fiscal year (*referrals provided for longer-term counseling*)
 - Daytime (M-F) & evening (M-Th) appointments
 - PAS phone # (**806.743.1327**) serves as a 24-hour crisis line

- PAS Offices in Lubbock
 - Counseling Center at TTUHSC, 1A300 (first floor – Pod A)
 - Call to schedule an appointment, or email:
counselingcenter@ttuhsc.edu



A Final Thought

The risk of physician burnout may begin in medical school, but this is also where you have the opportunity to educate yourselves about the challenges, adopt healthy behaviors to meet those challenges, and create for yourself a healthy lifestyle that will bolster your resilience and increase the probability of a long and satisfying career as a healthcare professional!