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RAP

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Counteract Mental Fatigue: Techniques to Use Today

One doctor locks her work problems in the car before entering the house to be with her family.

A resident showers at the gym after work and envisions the problems of the day washing down the drain before going home to his fiancée.

A surgeon keeps “work shoes” under his desk at the office and changes into his “dad shoes” (sneakers) at the end of the day to go home and play with his kids.

These transition rituals, offered by performance consultant John Brubaker, are among the strategies doctors can use to ward off mental fatigue. In his work with clients, including healthcare organizations, the

former college lacrosse coach offers realistic techniques for developing greater mental toughness and resilience.

Transition rituals can create a mental shift which allows you to be fully present and focused on the activity you are performing.

Much like Clark Kent gets in the phone booth to mentally and physically change into Superman, so can the physician change at the end of the day into Super Mom or Super Husband when they take off their scrubs, Brubaker says. “It’s helpful to have a symbolic, mental and physical shift that represents a transition from being a doctor to being a spouse or parent.”

The Value of a Brief Pause

Brief transition rituals can also be used in the middle of a busy work day, says Brubaker. “I liken it to being an actor on the set or an athlete on the field. When you are in the room with a patient, it’s ‘show time,’ and you give 100% of your effort to that patient. You are super-vigilant and engaged. Yet, no one can give 100% all of the time. So, when you leave the room, take a brief moment—even 30 seconds—for a drink of water or a few deep breaths. When you

Self care can be a challenge when you’re dealing with the constant challenges and stresses that accompany the residency experience. Yet the more you practice techniques to counter mental fatigue, the better doctor you will be. When you need some extra help getting through the rough spots, your Resident Assistance Program is here for you.

The caring professionals at RAP are a round-the-clock resource for guiding you through the challenges of residency.

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allow yourself that brief pause, you are less likely to find your energy depleted as the day—or night—goes on.”

Fatigue Affects Communication

There are dangers in trying to work through mental fatigue, and they’re not all the obvious ones, says Brubaker. “We all know about the mistakes like surgeons amputating the wrong limb. More often, a fatigued doctor is distracted, and bedside manner suffers.”

“We know that the physician who has poor communication skills is more likely to be sued,” Brubaker notes. “Mental fatigue can make a doctor avoid eye contact, and come across as impatient, cold or inattentive. That, in turn, can diminish the



“Of one thing I am certain: the body is not the measure of healing - peace is the measure.”

- George Melton

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Self Care: One-Minute Motivator

Performance consultant John Brubaker teaches this one minute motivator, an exercise which takes just one minute to perform. This short exercise serves to decrease pressure and helps enhance mental focus. As you transition from one task to the next, invest one minute in the following:

5 second affirmation statement which should fit what you need to feel in that present moment (for example: "I am a competent, confident provider" or "I'm energized and focused")

15 second deep breath (inhale for 6, pause for 3, exhale for 6)

20 second visualization of a positive outcome (which should also fit what you need to feel in that moment or day). Example 1: A success you experienced earlier that day or the day prior. Example 2: Successfully performing the next procedure or task on their schedule.

15 second deep breath

5 second affirmation statement

If you are behind schedule or double booked, you can even cut the time in half and make it a 30-second exercise, says Brubaker. "The key is not the length, it is investing a small amount of time daily to build this exercise into a habit. When you invest, you get a return in the form of greater focus and renewed mental stamina."

Your Resident Assistance Program

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

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

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How to Counteract Mental Fatigue

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level of trust a patient feels, and undermine the entire doctor-patient relationship."

Letting Go: Use a "Mistake Ritual"

We all have our favorite ways to celebrate successes. Yet we should also have a ritual for those times when something goes wrong, says Brubaker. "Imagine wearing a backpack, and that every time you made a mistake, or something upset you, you threw a brick into the backpack. After awhile, that backpack gets so heavy that you are no longer mobile."

Brubaker uses the mnemonic RAFL to help professionals release the emotional burdens that can exacerbate mental fatigue: **R**ecognize it, **A**dmit it, **F**orget or 'flush' it, and **L**earn from it.

"You may see athletes make a flushing gesture when they miss a shot or drop a pass, or pretend to crunch up a piece of paper and toss it," he says. "Those are multisensory metaphors for getting rid of something you don't want. When you have a ready formula to deal with inevitable mental mistakes, setbacks or self-blame, you can move beyond them instead of carrying them around."

It Does Get Better

"One thing that helped me tremendously during my residency was knowing that my sense of frustration and feelings of fatigue and inadequacy were completely normal, and that things would get better," says Sarah A. Samaan, MD, FACC.

"I still remember the intense sense of relief that I felt when an attending on the medicine wards spoke casually to my team about these very issues," Samaan continues. "Until that point, I thought I was the only one who felt that way." Samaan is a cardiologist with Legacy Heart Center in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, and co-directs the Women's Cardiovascular Institute at the Baylor Heart Hospital in Plano, Texas.

Start the Self-Care Habit Now

Samaan says she found that committing to exercise three times per week made a huge difference in her ability to cope with the mental and physical stress of her medical training. "Even if I didn't get my workout in until late at night, I made exercise a priority, and that habit has stuck with me through nearly 20 years of practice."

Without good self-care, you run the risk of fatigue and burnout, adds Brubaker. "And then, you're of no use to the people around you—patients, fellow residents, nursing staff and your family when you get home. Start practicing self-care now, and make it a habit."

Resources

- Performance Consultant John Brubaker www.johnbrubaker.com
- Best Practices for a Healthy Heart blog by Sarah Samaan: www.BestPracticesHealthyHeart.com
- "6 Ways to Tame Decision Fatigue," blog post by Trevor Lohrbeer <http://leandecisions.com/2012/07/6-ways-to-tame-decision-fatigue.html>