

# HOW TO BE A **BURNOUT-PROOF** SURGEON



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The life of a cardiothoracic surgeon is exhausting—being directly responsible for the lives of patients, responding to constant pressure from insurance companies and hospital administrators, and long hours—and the idea of a work-life balance can seem almost laughable.

Take a page from your well-rested coworkers and consider this collection of articles on the topic of physician burnout.



# 3 THINGS CARDIOTHORACIC SURGEONS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WORK-LIFE BALANCE

You've likely seen stories declaring it's impossible to "have it all" when it comes to work-life balance. And as a surgeon, you might agree. After all, unpredictable schedules and long hours can take away from time you want to spend with your family or enjoying leisure activities.

You already know [the pitfalls of burnout](#) and how it can affect your health and performance. Failing to recognize the need for a work-life balance can quickly put you on the road to burnout. [The Society of Thoracic Surgeons held a roundtable discussion](#) last year in San Diego, focusing on how cardiothoracic surgeons can achieve work-life balance. Here is some of what they had to say.



## IF YOU CAN, PROMOTE A WORK-LIFE BALANCE TO YOUR RESIDENTS

"The problem becomes much larger when work and life outside of work become one," said Fawwaz Shaw, a roundtable participant and a surgeon at Seattle Children's Hospital. He recommends trying to create an environment where there is increased job satisfaction. It also may be helpful for residents to find a faculty mentor who models good work-life balance, he suggests.

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## DEFINE WHAT WORK-LIFE BALANCE MEANS TO YOU

Work-life balance means different things to different people. Maybe you want a weekend off to camp with your family. Maybe you need a few hours in the evening to attend kids' sporting events. Maybe you want some time in the afternoon to enjoy a hobby.

"Everybody wants to take advantage of our Type A personalities," explained Nahush Mokadam, co-director of heart transplantation and program director for mechanical circulatory support at the University of Washington Medical Center. "If we allow that to happen unfettered, it will. It can consume you, so it's our responsibility to remember that's happening and say, 'You know what, this is important to me, that's not important to me and this is how I'm going to strike that balance.' "

If you're not sure what you'd like to get from your work-life balance, the [HappyMD](#) recommends considering what you'd like to focus on outside of medicine. Do you enjoy cooking? Writing? Looking to return to that hobby that you've been neglecting?

Also, focus on which relationships, activities and personal care needs are most important to you. Once you've established these things, write them down and keep the list handy so you'll always have a reminder of what's important to you outside of your job.





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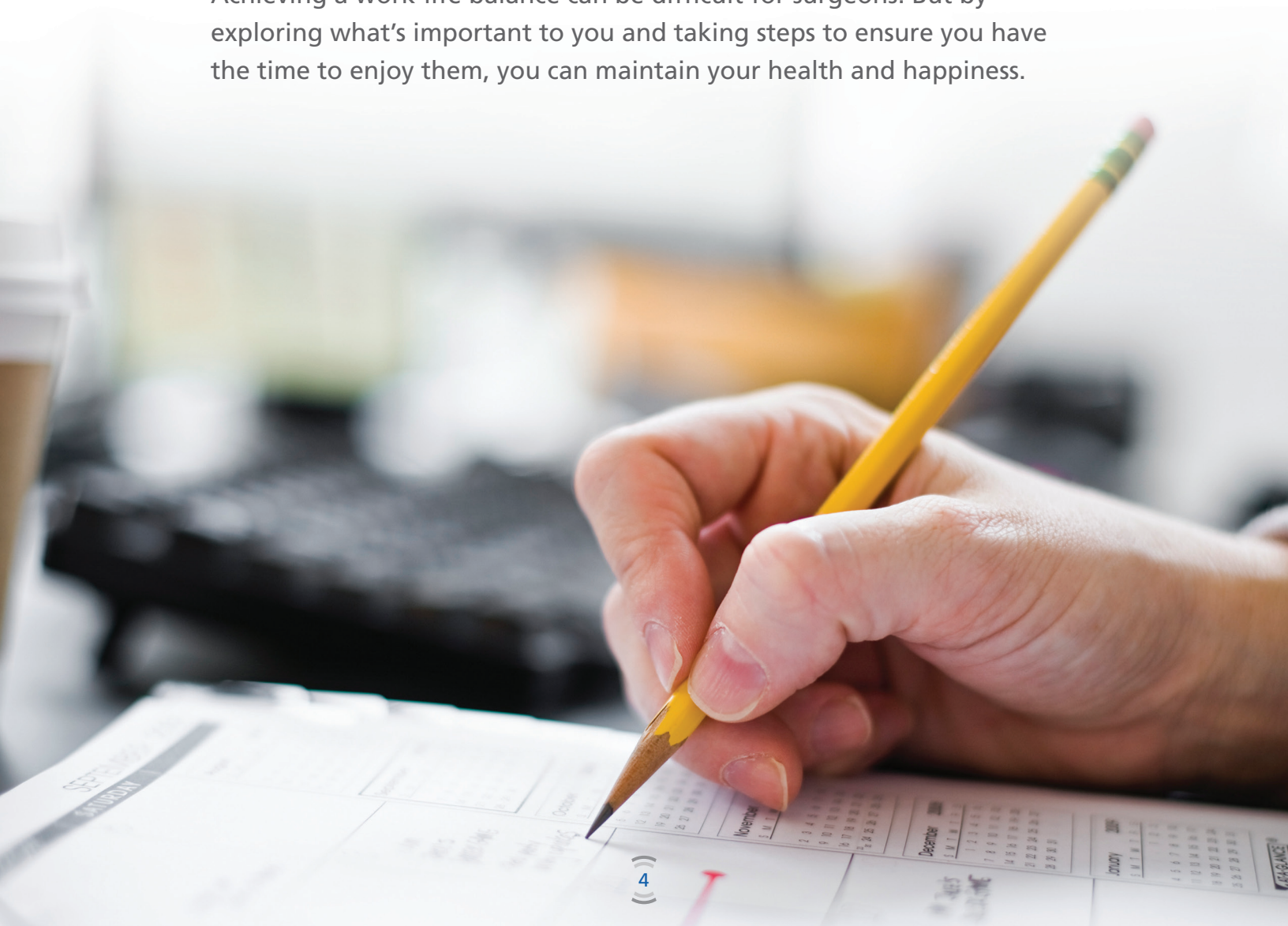
## MAKE A SCHEDULE

Now that you know what you'd like to focus on outside of work, write it into your schedule. Whether that's a physical calendar in your office or plugging an event into your event reminders on your phone, having a mental note of something you want to achieve outside of work can actually help you achieve it.

"In general, we're a bunch of 'yes' people. We say yes to everything. The importance for [hospital] leadership to recognize is that no, you shouldn't say yes to that. Go ahead and say no," said Mokadam.

"Empower people to say 'We have limits.' "

Achieving a work-life balance can be difficult for surgeons. But by exploring what's important to you and taking steps to ensure you have the time to enjoy them, you can maintain your health and happiness.



# SLEEP DEPRIVATION AND SURGEONS

As a surgeon, you face a unique set of challenges other professions do not: You've got to be on call and you work unpredictable hours, which means the need to work at night is an essential part of the job.

But night work means you're fighting to stay awake when your body is physiologically programmed to sleep—no matter how much coffee you drink or how much sleep you get during the day. Working at night increases your sleep debt, and working when most people are asleep can affect your health and possibly impact your ability to care for patients. Danish surgeon Ilda [Amirian](#) discovered that "sleep deprivation subjectively had an impact on the surgeons and that they were aware of the effect fatigue had on their work performance. As a result they applied different mechanisms to cope with fatigue."



# HOW THE U.S. WORK HOUR 'LIMIT' CAN AFFECT YOU

In the United States, where it is accepted and expected to “always be on,” the study unsurprisingly found surgeons worked far more hours than those in European countries.

Scandinavian physicians typically work 37 to 48 hours per week on average over four weeks; in the United Kingdom, it is 48 hours per week (the general EU maximum), and in the United States, the work hour restriction is 80 hours per week for surgical residents. [There is no formal work hour limit for attending surgeons in the United States](#), who typically work 50 to 60 hours a week. In Scandinavia, shift work is 16 to 24 hours, which means that physicians have the day off after a night shift. Similar to Scandinavia, the U.K. has a maximum of 16 hours of work in a 24-hour period. In the United States, physicians have been known to work extended shifts, meaning that their consecutive work hours can run more than 24 hours. At the other extreme, [Holland has a maximum of eight work hours](#).

As you can imagine, this can take a toll on a surgeon physically and mentally. These extended work hours, combined with a workload of 50-plus hours per week can—and often do, according to Amirian’s research—cause chronic sleep deprivation. Night work combined with these extended hours affected patient safety and physician health through increased risk of percutaneous injury.

Physicians driving home from their night shifts were also [more likely to be involved in motor vehicle crashes](#).



### 3 STRATEGIES TO FIGHT FATIGUE

#### 1 Establish a Solid Sleep Routine

This may seem obvious, but an essential part of maintaining health and reducing night-shift fatigue is to establish a solid sleep routine. To do this, make sure your bedroom is a suitable place for sleep. That means trying to avoid watching TV, using mobile devices or playing videos in your bedroom. When sleeping at home, always try to sleep in your bed and avoid using a couch or chair as a place to sleep.

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#### 2 Establish a Solid Sleep Routine

Naps are not reserved for young children. Taking an afternoon nap before a night shift or during your shift can give you an energy boost. If you nap during your shift, [try limiting your time asleep to no more than 45 minutes](#). Anything between 20 and 45 minutes can help [counteract fatigue](#).

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#### 3 Eat

Follow a similar eating pattern during night-shift work that you would during the day. Remember to eat and drink enough so you are not starting your shift hungry or thirsty. It is easy to miss regular meals when working at night because your circadian rhythms can affect appetite, and it is a time when most dining establishments are closed.

When your night shifts are finished, be sure to catch up on your sleep by going to bed as soon as you get home.



# HOW SURGEONS AND MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS CAN AVOID BURNOUT

Surgeons and other medical professionals work hard, put in long hours and regularly deal with life-and-death situations. Add to that load unpredictable schedules and the difficulty of creating and maintaining a work-life balance, and it is easy to see how burnout and stress can become a problem.

Dr. Tait Shanafelt, et al., in 2012 found that 40 percent of surgeons they surveyed were burned out. In addition, 30 percent had positive screenings for symptoms of depression. It's no surprise that if left unchecked, symptoms of burnout and depression can lead to counterproductive, unhealthy behavior that has the potential to affect your quality of life and patient care.

How can medical professionals reduce burnout and stress when dealing with the demands of rigorous schedules and the needs of patients?



Consider the following tips for recognizing, preventing and dealing with burnout:

## RECOGNIZING BURNOUT

Burnout is characterized by:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- A decreased sense of personal accomplishment

## AVOIDING BURNOUT

Though it can be difficult to find time to focus on non-medical interests, setting aside time to recharge and focus on interests outside of work plays an important role in avoiding burnout. Shanafelt and his team provide these [tips to promote personal wellbeing](#):

- To achieve a work-life balance, make a list of personal values and priorities and of professional values and priorities and integrate them.
- Reshape your practice to focus on the areas that are most meaningful to you (for example, patient care, patient education, medical education, research).
- Evaluate your skillset. Would improving your skills in a certain area or seeking additional training in a specific area reduce your stress at work?
- Find time to connect with colleagues and discuss the stressful and rewarding aspects of your practices.
- Nurture the personal wellness strategies that are of importance to you.
- Develop hobbies and use vacation time to pursue non-medical interests.
- Make sure you get adequate sleep, exercise and nutrition. Also, make time to receive regular medical care.

### DEALING WITH BURNOUT

If you notice some of the symptoms of burnout, the [American College of Surgeons](#) recommends asking for help—whether through asking colleagues to do some of your non-critical tasks like charting or finding a group of peers to connect with and share your experiences.

Try these tips, as well:

- Make a list of the stressors you are experiencing, and next to that list write a way you could modify it to reduce that stress.
- Delegate. Like asking for help, see if you can delegate tasks like paperwork or other non-critical items.
- Resist the urge to say “yes.” It’s OK to not take on any new projects or commitments while dealing with burnout.

Though burnout is a common affliction in the surgical field, it does not have to be career-ending. Recognizing its symptoms, taking time for yourself and asking for help when it is needed can help you stay on track.

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