

5 Tips for Developing Good Habits During Residency

By Liz Ferron, MSW, LICSW

Medical residency is a grueling, challenging and yet a very informative time in your medical career. You have to work extremely intense hours, overnights, you are constantly learning and reading, not to mention adjusting to a new hospital with different procedures, doctors and other staff. These rigorous schedules leave little to no time to meet your basic physiological needs, such as sleep, adequate nutrition and exercise, which can result in an increased risk of developing burnout. Burnout among medical students, residents and early career physicians is higher than their similarly aged counterparts in the general population, according to a March 2014 study in Academic Medicine¹.



This is why developing healthy habits during your residency is critical. Not only that, creating healthy habits during these formative years can set the stage for how you practice throughout your career. I interviewed Mark Mason, Ph.D., Resident Wellbeing Specialist and Licensed Psychologist at ChristianaCare Health System, who shared tips to help you form good habits and make the most of your residency to set you up for a fulfilling, rewarding and healthy medical career.

Make the most of your limited time.

Working 80-hour weeks can leave little time for anything else, so it is very important to make the most of your limited time away from work. Try out different methods to stay organized to find what works for you. Whether it's a planner, electronic calendar, written to-do lists or setting reminders on your phone, having everything in one place can help you efficiently manage your limited time. You can also use [WorkLife Concierge](#) from VITAL WorkLife to help—set wake up calls, create reminders and complete everyday errands like grocery shopping, getting an oil change or picking up your dry cleaning.

With your busy schedule, develop a system to prioritize tasks. Don't be afraid to ask your attending or chief resident to help prioritize your tasks. In addition, you are adjusting to a new schedule, so allowing yourself extra time to get places or complete tasks will alleviate stress.

While it may seem difficult, having a life outside of residency can have a positive impact on your well being. Try to have different outlets outside of the hospital to help stay balanced and avoid having "all your eggs in one basket."

And, don't forget that you can say "no." Residency offers so many opportunities, it's easy to overload with too many commitments. Part of protecting your time is prioritizing, but also saying no to opportunities that don't fulfill your long-term goals or may overwhelm you.

Make time for self-care.

This may be an obvious one, but it's a big one. There is no one "right" way to practice self-care—it is unique to the individual. Self-care is the practice of taking action to preserve or improve *your own* health (because you can't control what's going on around you).

Even if it's something as simple as going outside for a few minutes, going for a 10-minute walk or taking a few deep breaths, stepping away for a little bit can make a significant difference.

Carve out time for movement and exercise. The negative effects of neglecting basic human needs such as sleep, food, water and exercise can add up fast, so make an effort to prioritize these things even on hectic days. Take the stairs every chance you get, have healthy snacks on hand such as fruit, pre-cut vegetables or protein bars for those times when you only have five minutes to spare. The little things add up!

Develop a strong support system.

This includes leaders, your attendings, other residents and those outside of the workplace. The beginning of residency can be overwhelming and isolating, so it's important to have people you trust that you can turn to. Seek out those you'd like to emulate in your career and form a strong bond with other residents who understand how demanding residency can be. Developing good relationships early can help with feeling connected and having a sense of belonging. It can also be beneficial to have social connections outside of the workplace to help escape the demands of the job, even if it's for a very short period of time!

Find your niche.

Dr. Mason says one of the most important things you can do in your residency is to use your personal strengths.

“Tap into your personal values and strengths. Seeing the profession of medicine as a calling and really connecting with the meaningfulness of your work can guide you and allow you to be fully who you are.”

Using your own unique strengths to find your purpose and passion in your work can be fulfilling. There are many resources and tools online that can help with career mapping, such as [StrengthsFinder](#).

Dr. Mason also said to take a moment, acknowledge and celebrate what you've already accomplished! It can be easy to forget, especially when you're surrounded by other successful, high-achieving peers. Part of applying your strengths is celebrating all of your past accomplishments.

Dr. Mason also suggests finding a good personal match for both your residency program and future workplace is very important. Make sure the culture, environment and the people are a good fit for you, your interests and passions. You'll find this cultural fit helps a great deal in supporting your personal well being.

Talk it out.

Talking with another clinician can offer tremendous relief and validation. Start by reaching out to a colleague who seems sympathetic and ask them if they have time for coffee. Ask them how things are going for them. Share your experiences—both the joys and challenges. If you find that person isn't open, then try someone else.

Additionally, or as an alternative, we encourage you to utilize Peer Coaching through VITAL WorkLife. This is an external, confidential resource (no one will know you've reached out unless you tell them) where you can talk with someone who understands the experiences you are going through in residency. With a Peer Coach, you can validate your emotions, develop leadership skills and build confidence, learn tools for effectively communicating with colleagues and much more.

We Can Help

Contact us at **877.731.3949** or through the **VITAL WorkLife App** to access your [VITAL WorkLife Well Being Resources](#). You have access to a wealth of resources to support your well being and work-life balance during residency, from counseling to peer coaching and WorkLife Concierge and more.

Read Liz Ferron's bio [here](#).

Sources:

¹https://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/fulltext/2014/03000/Burnout_Among_U_S_Medical_Students,_Residents,.25.aspx

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