

VIEWPOINT

Optimizing Joy in Surgery

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Burnout is one of the most tragic developments in the field of surgery. Like any substantial problem, burnout is the consequence of many complex factors and influences. This complexity can precipitate feelings of futility that easily devolve into a narrative that individuals are not responsible and their problems can only be solved by others. The external factors and system issues accelerating burnout in health care are widely described.¹ Addressing those factors is probably the greatest current responsibility of those in leadership roles in institutions.

Nevertheless, I want to redirect the focus toward what surgeons can do, individually and collectively, to go beyond mere protection or minimizing the effects of burnout. I want surgeons to reach the state of happiness and joy in their magnificent careers.

Some surgeons are seemingly always happy and resistant to burnout. These colleagues are seen as optimists and tend to have very successful practices and careers. Some observers might assume that this career success begets the happiness. Psychology research suggests the converse: happiness drives success. Studies show that activities precipitating positive affect lead to better performance of both simple and complex tasks, whether in controlled laboratory experiments or life accomplishments.²

Might these happy surgeons be blessed with innate happiness? While such a happiness set point might partially account for these happy surgeons, there are behaviors that one can practice and develop as skills to improve one's happiness. For example, a fairly easy starting point is the practice of reflecting, taking stock, and acknowledging what is going well. In the case of surgeons, that might be to celebrate the privilege of being surgeons. Surgeons were attracted to a career in surgery by the opportunities for using their intellects and breadth of knowledge, combined with the privilege of using physical skills to decisively intervene in helping patients.

Any opportunity spent pausing and reflecting on what is good can measurably stimulate positive neurochemical changes. Richard Thirby, MD, provides a good surgical template³ for such reflection. Such a positive acknowledgment facilitates higher-level affective function, optimizing problem solving, enhancing creativity, and increasing tolerance for the challenges or problems that are inevitably encountered. Because happiness produces success, purposefully taking stock of the good things in surgical practice can prepare the brain to function on a higher plane, bolstering resilience.

Achieving happiness is valuable yet not easily done. It is also not the same as joy. Joy is a deeper, more enduring, and more powerful state. It helps individuals navigate the certain assaults of life's challenges, keeping them in balance. The Dalai Lama describes the Buddhist con-

cept that joy is humanity's essential nature and the desire to return to the state of joy is a human goal. He also asserts everyone can realize joy through cultivating the skill. With that basis, consider this potential toolbox of 8 practices for surgeons seeking joy.

First, spend time nightly reflecting on 3 things for which you are grateful. Examples might include the heartfelt thanks received from patients, the great teamwork an operating room crew displayed, or the pleasure felt watching trainees make real progress in their surgical skill. Once reflecting becomes a habit, enter those grateful thoughts into a journal. People who begin the practice of gratitude journaling demonstrate a significant improvement in their affect, and this improvement is sustained for weeks.⁴

Second, look for the humor in life. All happy surgeons seem to demonstrate great senses of humor. All are able to laugh at themselves. Humor does not need to be a distraction or imply a lack of attention to the important tasks at hand. Provided it has no malice or derision, humor is a superb way to make others on teams relax and be at their best.

Third, be intentional. Begin each day with 3 thoughts about positive things to be done today. Ideally these would be things that one could do to benefit others. Consider writing a note to someone who is struggling, thanking someone who does a great job without acclaim, or learning something new about a team member.

Fourth, be a leader. Leaders in health care are often less negative and less prone to burnout. They are often optimists who relish looking beyond problems toward opportunities. Leaders can have influence, which maximizes their sense of possibility, relevance, value, and control. The leadership role need not be large or associated with a title but should have some important bearing on one's professional activities, so that the sense of agency and value can be cultivated.

Fifth, be a teacher. Many happy surgeons describe the opportunity to train young surgeons as one of their greatest joys. These same joyful surgeons are also often viewed as great mentors. Mentorship and teaching have much in common, although mentorship may be more future facing and focused on the possibilities for what could be. That spawns optimism for both the mentor and mentee.

Sixth, learn to cultivate compassion. There is a crescendo of attention focused on compassion training in health care.⁵ Importantly, this is not just about meeting the needs of patients, but also about how learning compassion can bring personal joy. The feelings associated with empathy and compassion can excite areas of the brain associated with happiness and joy.

Seven, stay involved in the community. Belonging to a community and collaborating with others is an irrefutable source of happiness and joy. Active engage-

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ment in surgical societies is one example. There might be more efficient ways to earn continuing medical education credits, but attending surgical society meetings imparts much more human interaction, learning through dialogue, and lasting friendships.

Finally, consider accepting coaching. Executive coaching is valuable yet not commonly used among surgeons. Coaching should not be limited to those who are underperforming or struggling. Coaching can help amplify all surgeons' skills. Coaches can help surgeons find their strengths and the power in their lives, bringing great joy. The return on investment is substantial.

Most surgeons entered surgery with great joy. Through busy careers, some have lost that joy. Since joy is the natural state that humans all seek to rediscover, surgeons can take charge of their happiness as much as feasible and purposefully move toward joy. The

stress of practicing surgery is substantial. Yet, if surgeons can leverage these principles to help revive our joy, they will be more immune to that stress and continue to thrive.

My hope for all surgeons is to find their own ways to cultivate happiness and joy in their lives as surgeons. Surgeons have the privilege of providing a great service to humanity and influence countless lives through surgical skills. If surgeons can (1) acknowledge gratitude for magnificent careers, (2) positively reframe perspectives about the challenges in life using some of the tools presented, and (3) harness the capacity for compassion, then surgeons can find joy in surgery again. With some focused effort and skill development, surgeons can try to change the things over which they have control and reclaim that joy that brought them into this fabulous career. That is my wish for all surgeons: that they optimize joy in surgery.

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