

# How to practise medicine, well

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I have become obsessed with an idea, one that started out as an interest in “physician wellness” and has evolved into a vision of physicians working and existing at their absolute best: inspired, resourced, and capable of the effect they seek to have. Can you imagine what this extraordinary group of people would get done? As it is, physicians already make invaluable contributions, and this is with burnout affecting at least 30% of us.<sup>1</sup> If we were working at our absolute best, we would be unstoppable.

What would your day be like if you and all your colleagues consistently arrived at work happy to be there?

I suspect that you, too, are into physician wellness—code for “enjoying your life and career.” How to arrive at that enjoyment is going to be different for everyone. My intention is to share some strategies to help you figure out what you need to be genuinely satisfied in your medical practice.

## Say yes and no

Time is a finite resource; every time you say yes to something, you’re saying no to something else. The trade-off is what economists call *opportunity cost*: the loss of the potential gains you might have received if you hadn’t given up one opportunity to pursue another. This first strategy is about becoming aware of the trade-offs you’re making all the time. Enjoying your work (and life) is simple: do more of what you love and less of what drains you. One of the reasons we are unsuccessful making changes is that we say yes to what we want to fit in without making room for it by saying no to something else. To say yes to finishing your charting by 5 PM, you might have to say no to seeing 35 patients a day, to more than 1 or 2 topics per visit, or to seeing patients after 4 PM. It’s totally up to you. Make trade-offs enthusiastically. Be creative.

What do you really want? What are you willing to say no to, to make it possible? What trade-offs did you make today and what would you do differently next time?

## Commit to non-negotiables

What do you really need to enjoy your day and do a great job? This strategy is to focus on the things you can control: your non-negotiables. Start with the basics: How much sleep do you need? What meals or snacks will keep you well fueled? What about exercise—what kind of activity and how often? How much social time and how much downtime is important to you? How many hours of work can you do happily, and what breaks do you require

in the day? Then get picky! What kind of workstation do you want? What about your commute? Get specific. How are you willing to feel about work? For example, “I’m willing to be frustrated 1 or 2 days a week, but not every day.” Non-negotiables are the conditions you commit to meeting to set yourself up for success. Decide in advance what they are and be uncompromising.

If you genuinely don’t know what you need, it’s time to experiment and figure it out. Try something new each week or each month and evaluate its effect. What matters is that you start—don’t worry about getting it perfect. You will learn and make course corrections along the way. Even small changes can make a big difference.

## Make better decisions

We have lots of training when it comes to clinical decision making, but when it comes to making decisions about what work we do and how it fits in our lives, we’re beginners. Medical school and residency demand compliance and condition us to meet others’ expectations. Often that mindset stays with us as we move into our own practices. It can be hard to recognize that we have choice now and almost limitless options.

How much of how you do things now is based on how your preceptors did things, or how your colleagues operate? Of course, I’m not talking about deviating from evidence-based medicine. What I mean is how you’re *delivering* it and what your day looks like overall. We often have more choices to make and options available than we might at first perceive.

Decision making sometimes gets in the way of experimenting with new approaches. When you’re feeling stuck, chances are good you’re weighing up 2 good options or 2 bad options. Free yourself from the deadlock of *A* versus *B* by building yourself a third, better option. Make it an amazing option: why not? Once the possibility is on your radar, you’ll have a much better chance of figuring out how to realize it. You’ll surprise yourself.

For example, rather than ask yourself “Should I get my charting done or go to the gym tonight?” ask “How can I get my charting done *and* go to the gym tonight (what will I say no to)?” Instead of “Should I do rural medicine or work in the city so I can actually meet someone?” ask “How can I do rural medicine *and* meet someone I really like?” What decisions have you feeling stuck? Is there a third, better option to consider? What do you *really* want?

Finally, take the pressure off yourself: you are free to change your mind if something doesn’t work. You can

make new decisions whenever you want. You can make a great decision and still have a disappointing outcome; there's always an element of uncertainty at play. It's a skill to make choices about how you set up your life and, like everything else, with practice you'll get better at it.

### Plan for rough patches

One of the challenges facing many physicians is a lack of insight about our own dissatisfaction or stress. We're too resilient—we just go and go. Assume you are one of these physicians. What's the giveaway that you're stressed? If you can identify your red flags, you can devise a strategy to apply before you get run down. Make a plan when you're feeling resourced that will be easy to activate when you're feeling overwhelmed or tired. Know who you're going to call and what type of commitment will be the first you'll cancel to free yourself up.

### Get traction on making changes

Set aside time to review what's working and what needs improvement. Think of it as a quality improvement project. Take a moment daily, weekly, or monthly (whatever works for you!) to look at how you're doing things, what's working well, and what's not. Make it easy for yourself: build a list through the week to help you notice what could be better and problems that need solving.

Turbocharge this process by transforming these items into a list of objectives, projects, and goals. For instance, write down "I stay on time during counseling visits" instead of "I keep going overtime during my counseling visits," or "I leave at 5 PM every day" instead of "I keep getting stuck at work late." Then make a note of the very next thing you need to do to make these improvements.

### Apply the strategies

I invite you to make it your goal to really enjoy your work and your life.

Physician wellness isn't a group project; achieving it depends on each of us prioritizing our own experience. What's your biggest take-away from these strategies? What's the first step you would like to take? 

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#### Competing interests

**Dr McCaskill** has a coaching practice of her own, coaches residents for the Department of Family Medicine at the University of British Columbia, and is a coach for Seth Godin's altMBA program.

#### Reference

1. Canadian Medical Association. *CMA national physician health survey. A national snapshot*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Medical Association; 2018. Available from: <https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/2018-11/nph-survey-e.pdf>. Accessed 2020 Jul 14.

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