Coping With Stress in Medical School

Stress and burnout are extremely common among medical students, residents, and even practicing physicians. As HelpGuide.org points out, while stress is about “too much” – too many demands, too much to do, too many pressures – burnout is about “feeling empty, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring.” Complete mental and physical exhaustion – burnout – often results from high levels of unrelenting stress, which is, in fact, how medical students often describe medical school – it never stops and there’s no time to catch your breath. The best way to deal with burnout is to prevent it in the first place through effective stress management. The consequences of burnout can be devastating. Seek professional help if (1) you have no energy, don't see the point of anything, feel depressed, don’t enjoy anything anymore, or have thoughts or suicide, or (2) if you see signs of these things in a friend or peer, or know someone who has become socially isolated.

MSUCOM Office of Personal Counseling & Health Promotion
Preventing burnout
Stress Symptoms, Signs, & Causes

MANAGE STRESS TO PREVENT BURNOUT
Stress is a normal part of a medical student's life. First rule: don’t assume that every one else is coping better than you are, that you’re the only one who feels stressed-out, or that your high levels of stress mean there’s something wrong with you. Some individuals are better able to put on their “calm face,” while others exhibit obvious signs of being overly stressed. Everyone copes differently, and how you cope depends on a number of factors, including genetics, personality, health, past experiences, and current circumstances. Be aware that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with stress.

Unhealthy coping mechanisms include:
- Physically harming yourself and/or engaging in self-destructive behaviors (promiscuous sex, gambling, excessive gaming) and/or addictive behaviors (drinking too much, taking illicit drugs, over-medicating, smoking, consuming too much caffeine)
- Over- or under-eating
- Procrastinating and/or wasting time in trivial pursuits, e.g., watching TV or surfing the Internet
- Sleeping too much
- Staying “busy” to avoid dealing with problems
- Withdrawing from relationships
- Becoming angry and lashing out at others

Healthy stress management strategies

Quick tips:
- Inventory your stressors to determine which you can avoid, minimize, adapt to, or accept
- Exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, get at least 7 hours of sleep each night, nourish your healthy relationships, and banish your toxic relationships
- Practice deep breathing and other relaxation techniques daily, especially before bed time
  - 10 Relaxation Techniques That Zap Stress Fast
  - Stress management
- Practice mindfulness