

Discussion: Practicing Emotional Self-awareness to Build Surgeon Resilience

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Attention to surgeon wellness continues to evolve in an effort to optimize and preserve the surgery workforce. In this article, Tandon et al¹ defined an effective and useful tool that should be part of every surgeon's wellness armamentarium. The authors outline the Interprofessional Education Collaborative (IPEC) framework, a tool that helps an individual understand their responses to stress in a way that considers thoughts, emotions, and actions.¹ The framework consists of 7 distinct, ascending levels with each level describing a possible response one may have to a high-stress situation. Levels 1 and 2 are more internally focused, driven by the "fight or flight" response where emotions such as anger, fear, and anxiety dominate. Levels 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 are more externally focused, where themes of acceptance, purpose, connection, and curiosity prevail. The authors offer realistic examples of how this model could apply to the practice of a plastic surgeon.

In 2018, one-third of practicing plastic surgeons and residents expressed feelings of high emotional exhaustion and depersonalization related to their jobs.² Although significant work has gone into better understanding the issue, efforts to provide solutions are a current focus. The IPEC framework may resonate with some, whereas others may read this and struggle to apply it. It is, therefore, important to define a wide variety of ways that surgeons can choose from to build resilience and promote their well-being.

For the individual, there are multiple evidence-based tools to strengthen emotional self-awareness and build resilience. In the physical dimension, regular exercise, meditation and mindfulness, health screenings, ergonomics, and nutrition are associated with decreased burnout.³ Others include promoting work-life balance and focusing on surgeon-patient relationships to maintain meaning in one's work.³ Intellectually, participation in conferences, leadership development, teaching, and research foster a growth mindset, keeping career work engaging.

It is important to note that individual strategies are most successful when they exist in a supportive workplace. Appelbaum et al⁴ demonstrated that among surgery residents, job satisfaction is significantly predicted by workplace climate, which was associated with perceptions of organizational support. Among physicians, organizational factors impacting well-being include opportunities for leadership development, improving practice efficiency, and optimizing administrative policies.⁵ Organizational culture that cultivates community and collegiality is associated with job satisfaction among surgeons; in scenario 2, it is not difficult to imagine how, despite recognizing the need to talk to a colleague about a frustration, starting that conversation depends on a culture where one feels safe to do so.

Just like Tandon et al¹ made the IPEC framework useful to all plastic surgeons, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons recently launched Project Well, a series of modules designed for plastic surgeons by plastic surgeons to serve as a comprehensive resource to address the multiple dimensions of wellness. The modules, as well as the individual application of the IPEC framework so well described by the authors of this valuable article, should serve as perfect starting points for the wellness quest of all plastic surgeons.

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DISCLOSURES

Dr. Bentz is the past chair of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons Wellness Committee and Project Well. Dr. Smith has no financial interest to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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