

# Making the Most of Your Off-hours

Chances are, you don't have as much free time as you'd like. By prioritizing at both office and home, it's possible to free up precious time for the activities you enjoy.

## **Chapter in Brief:**

- ▲ *If work schedules are impeding leisure time, it may be time to ask yourself, "Am I working to live or living to work?" Your career should enhance your life, not supersede it.*
- ▲ *Doctors aren't the only ones overscheduled these days. Children sign up for too many afterschool activities, leaving too little time for relaxing family activities. Taking time to define priorities as a family may help determine which activities are important to continue and which can go.*
- ▲ *Physicians are often asked to volunteer at work or in the community. While these activities can greatly enhance one's life or career and support worthy organizations, it's not necessary to say yes to every opportunity.*

The typical doctor's day may go something like this: Early morning committee meeting at the hospital followed by inpatient rounds; full patient load all morning at the office or in the operating room; lunch (if you're lucky) during which time you may be simultaneously returning phone calls, checking e-mail, reading a medical journal, or sitting in yet another meeting; a full afternoon of patients followed by an hour of return phone calls; one more quick trip to the hospital; and then (hopefully before dinner or at least in time to see the kids before they go to sleep) you make it home. But wait, you're on call tonight



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—CNBC's Power Lunch  
August 28, 2007

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and may field several calls or even return to the hospital.

How many professionals outside of medicine do you know who maintain this kind of marathon schedule? Not many. When you work this hard, it's essential to enjoy yourself when you are off and make the most of those precious leisure hours. Simplifying, creating work/life balance, not overbooking yourself and your family, learning to say no, engaging in enjoyable hobbies, and socializing can all serve to make your time away from the office and hospital enjoyable and meaningful.

### **Simplify, Simplify, Simplify**

There are 24 hours in the day, 168 hours in a week. Where does the time go? For many busy people, it gets gobbled up by tending to the details of our often unnecessarily overcomplicated lives. Here are three practical ideas to help simplify your life in key areas—money, material objects, and health/fitness—so that you will have more time for what is important to you.

**Organize your finances.** Meet with your financial planner, CPA, or other advisor to find out how you can better organize your banking, investment accounts, and insurance policies in order to stop spending hours every month keeping track. Unless money management is enjoyable for you (and you're good at it), then in most instances, the simpler the better.

**Get rid of things you don't need, use regularly, or enjoy fully.** Look around your home and office for things that are no longer of value, and give them the boot (donate to charity, sell, or check out [www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org) to find them a good home). Weigh the enjoyment versus the hassle factor of owning more than one home, multiple cars, and vacation time-shares.

**Get back to basics for health and fitness.** Are you one of the thousands (perhaps even millions) of Americans who have exercise equipment at home and/or a gym membership that you rarely use? Consider simplifying your fitness routine and getting back in touch with nature at the same time. Find a few trails near your home or office, and simply shoe up and go.

### **Finding Balance**

Achieving reasonable balance between a successful career and a satisfying personal life can be a challenge for physicians, says

## Work-life Balance Key to Physician Job Satisfaction

Can physicians who neglect their own health and well-being effectively attend to the health and well-being of their patients? Research shows a direct relationship between physician burnout and the risk of medical errors. Also, as we face a worsening physician shortage especially among primary care physicians, it becomes more important to ensure that health organizations find ways to promote job satisfaction and prevent burnout among doctors. In the spring of 2008, the Department of Medicine at the Mayo Clinic approved seven principles to do just that. It turns out that encouraging physicians to pursue interests outside of medicine may be key to keeping them in medicine.

In the December 2008 issue of *Minnesota Medicine*, members of Department of Medicine listed seven principles to promote physician job satisfaction and work-life balance. The principles identified include the following:

- Meaningful work
- Challenges commensurate with skills, interests, and resources
- Opportunities for professional development
- A culture that cultivates professionalism and professional satisfaction
- Autonomy and flexible scheduling
- A culture that values and encourages life outside of work
- A culture of wellness

In their discussion of these principles, the authors conclude: "It is our belief that academic medical centers and healthcare organizations can cultivate environments that promote a balance between work and life and, thus, enhance physician satisfaction...Making an effort to promote physician wellness and resilience has the potential to improve both quality of care and physician productivity."

*Source: Minnesota Medicine, December 2008.*

Joe Robinson, author of *Work to Live: The Guide to Getting a Life* (Perigee Trade, 2003). Mr. Robinson conducts workshops throughout the country and coaches overworked professionals who want to redesign their lives. "Doctors fall into a couple of patterns that make them more prone to the overwork syndrome," says Mr. Robinson. "Most are type A. They are very achievement and results oriented."

Then there is what he calls the "performance identity," which is not unique to physicians. "We all have it to one degree or another because that's how we're programmed as a culture. Our

worth depends on what we do in a given day,” says Mr. Robinson. This identification can lead one to believe that there is little value in other realms of life.

“Doctors have important tasks and define themselves by getting results,” says Mr. Robinson. “They book themselves back-to-back. That’s a choice. There is a belief [in our culture] that we can’t stop for a second or everything will go to hell.”

But, he notes, overwork leads to burnout; and burnout leads to health problems. “We know from research that people who work chronic 12-hour days are three times more likely to have heart attacks,” says Mr. Robinson.

Not taking time to relax and renew, says Mr. Robinson, is akin to expecting your cellphone to spontaneously recharge itself. “We need a methodology for refueling every day, not just on weekends and vacations,” he says. He recommends that doctors build in two 10-to-15-minute “strategic pauses” each morning and afternoon. “Walk, listen to music, plan your weekend,” suggests Mr. Robinson. Taking short breaks throughout the day will decrease stress, fatigue, and the likelihood of making mistakes. “More than the average person, doctors ought to be aware of the consequences of not making the time to renew themselves. When they don’t, they’re running counter to their own training and learning. Heal thyself,” says Mr. Robinson.

Scott Gaertner, MD, is a family physician with a thriving practice in Austin, Tex., who takes time out of his busy schedule to engage in activities that recharge his battery and keep stress and burnout at bay. “I have a few things that I thoroughly enjoy doing; and my wife, my child, and my practice [staff] all understand that those are priorities at certain times,” he says. He finds that arranging to meet a friend for these activities helps him keep his commitment to take care of himself. Writing into the schedule ‘Run with Dr. Crawford at 12:30’ makes it less likely that he’ll give up this important time in order to have lunch with a drug rep or to see a non-emergency add-on patient.

Dr. Gaertner likes to remind himself of the axiom: Are you living to work or working to live? “You must positively take the concept of ‘work to live’ to heart,” he says. He concedes that it can be expensive. “Doctors do not make money unless they’re working; and we have expenses that never end, even when we’re

on vacation.” But time off is important, he says, and he takes two vacations each year on average, plus one CME getaway. Honoring the need for rest and renewal doesn’t necessarily mean packing a suitcase and boarding an airplane, however.

Mr. Robinson encourages his clients to find activities that provide high satisfaction and engage in them on a regular basis. “Research shows that where people get satisfaction and self-worth is from internal rewards—doing things just for the sake of doing them,” he says. So you may never be Lance Armstrong or Yo-Yo Ma, but that shouldn’t stop you from enjoying weekend bike rides or taking cello lessons. “Hobbies get you out of that loop in your head that’s constantly circling back to your performance worries,” says Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Robinson recently traveled to Florida to research his next book. There he encountered a group of women—all breast cancer survivors—who’d taken up racing dragon boats. “There are twenty-two people in the boat who all have to work together,” he explains. “Everyone on this team had been through chemo . . . and had been told they should never lift more than ten pounds, and they were out there rowing,” says Mr. Robinson. “They’re living their lives and have never been happier. This is an example of the difference that can be made when we really participate in the adventure [of life],” he says. “These women know what it’s like to get out there and partake and not be measured continually by the professional gauge.”

## The Busy Family

Pam Vaccaro, nationally recognized speaker and owner of Designs On Time in St. Louis, Mo., says one way doctors create complexity in their lives is by overscheduling their kids. “Children have too many activities today,” says Ms. Vaccaro. Many parents spend an inordinate amount of time shuttling children to and from scheduled activities, even when the children themselves may not enjoy them. Busy parents fall into the trap of feeling guilty for missed piano recitals, soccer matches, and teacher conferences when their schedules collide with those of their children. “Simplify the expectations—you’re in control of the activities,” Ms. Vaccaro says.

Parents overbook their children in part out of fear, says man-

agement consultant Patrick Lencioni. “They fear that somehow they’ll look back and have regrets. We want our kids to have every opportunity possible; but when we take advantage of too many opportunities, we’re not fully taking advantage of any. More is not necessarily better,” he says.

Mr. Lencioni is an expert in organizational development and the author of eight books, including *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) and *Death by Meeting* (Jossey-Bass, 2004). He travels the country delivering keynote speeches, facilitating workshops, and consulting with top-level executives at Fortune 500 companies. Through conversations with these business leaders, Mr. Lencioni realized that hectic home lives among busy professionals had become commonplace, even epidemic. Executives complained that their lives at home were more chaotic than at work. The father of four young boys, Mr. Lencioni’s own personal life was not exactly tranquil; so, wondering whether the principles that bring order to organizations might also work for families, he researched and wrote *The Three Big Questions for the Frantic Family* (Jossey-Bass, 2008).

“A family is an organization like any other and the most important organization in our lives,” says Mr. Lencioni. As with any organization, someone has to be at the helm. “The parents are the leaders of the organization. To do nothing to manage is to abdicate responsibility.” He says too many parents are reactive in the way they “lead” the family, getting through each day without a plan or strategy. For some parents, it is tempting to go along with whatever the children want in order to avoid conflict. “That’s wanting to be liked rather than doing what’s best for them. Our job is to guide our children,” says Mr. Lencioni, adding that parenting sometimes means getting kids to do things they might not choose for themselves (homework, anyone?).

The main way to avoid having a frantic domestic life, says Mr. Lencioni, is to be clear about the family’s values and set priorities based on those values. In his new book he offers three questions that help parents develop a clear context for making decisions about time management for the family:

**(1) What makes your family unique?** Mr. Lencioni recommends identifying “two or three core principles that are inherent in the parents and that they admire about one another.” These

principles can help family members prioritize activities and goals.

**(2) What is your family's top priority right now?** To answer this question, look back for a few months at the decisions you've made and how you've spent your time. Try to identify categories, patterns, and trends. Then declare one main priority for the entire family to rally around for the next two or three months.

**(3) How do you talk about and use the answers to these questions?** It's not enough to answer the first two questions, Mr. Lencioni says; you have to figure out how to use the answers to help bring family members together. He suggests regular family meetings to discuss how core principles and priorities affect everyday decisions.

Having clear values and goals and spending time accordingly benefits everyone. "If parents are stressed out, the kids are, too. If we're overcommitted, not sleeping enough, running around—it feeds the stress," says Mr. Lencioni. "Sanity, peace of mind, less guilt, greater courage in decision making, and better time together as a family," he says, are among the many benefits of taking the time to strategize and manage the organization that is your family. In addition, parents who function as good leaders set a positive example for children and instill values that they can rely on when they themselves are busy professionals, juggling career and family.

## Just Say No

As a diligent physician you are no doubt routinely asked to spend your precious off-hours on projects and activities that you'd rather skip. Repeatedly saying yes to everyone is a recipe for a frantic and overbooked life. "If you have priorities, you can say no with confidence," says Mr. Lencioni.

"People overcommit because they don't know how much they're already committed to," says David Allen, productivity consultant and author of the bestseller, *Getting Things Done* (Penguin, 2002). He suggests physicians make a list of everything they are committed to working on and completing over the next few weeks or months. Knowing how full your plate is can be useful when deciding what else—if anything—you can realistically take on. "Take an inventory once a week," says Mr.

Allen. “This serves as a guide for when to say yes or no in any given moment. “You want to do good work and make an impact and earn money,” says Mr. Allen, “but you don’t [want to] pull back on your standards. Become more conscious and adult about how much you can really take on.”

A few questions to ponder:

- Would this be a good use of my time?
- In what ways is this activity, project, or cause aligned with my personal values?
- Would I enjoy spending time with the other people who are likely to be involved?
- What is the ultimate benefit to myself, my family, or others?
- Can I realistically devote the proper time to this activity?

“Physicians have a hard time saying no,” says Dr. Gaertner. “We’re asked to add on cases, double-book, and volunteer in various ways.” He contends that doctors must learn to say no more effectively if they want to have a private life and deliver quality medical care. “If you say yes to everything, then you become mediocre at everything,” says Dr. Gaertner.

According to Ms. Vaccaro, saying no is about being honest. If your answer is an unequivocal no, then just say it—firmly and politely. “Thank you for thinking of me, but no,” suggests Ms. Vaccaro. “No explanation necessary, end of sentence,” she adds. If you need time to consider a request, say that. For example, “I’d like to think about that and get back to you” leaves the door open for you to ultimately say yes or no. But she advises against using that tactic simply as a way to get rid of someone. The most respectful way to use this technique is to let the other person know what to expect. “I’ll get back to you by Friday,” offers Ms. Vaccaro as an example.

Another effective way to approach a request for your time is negotiation. If you are asked to volunteer for a cause that you are genuinely interested in but that may take up too much time, say yes—with conditions. Perhaps you agree to participate only during the planning stage and let others take over for executing the plan. Or maybe you know you’d be best working behind the scenes. Say yes, but clarify exactly what you are willing to do based on your skills, interests, and availability.

## Understanding Opportunity Cost

David Bohl, former venture capitalist turned life coach, uses the concept of opportunity cost—a carryover from his financial career—to help his clients make better choices about how they manage their time. This economic theory states that, in most instances, in order to have one thing, you must give up another. For example, if you invest your entire retirement account in the stock market, you cannot invest those same funds in the bond market. We must choose how to spend or invest money, and we certainly must choose how to spend an even more precious resource—our time. “[Understanding] opportunity cost is about making better decisions,” says Mr. Bohl. “In this hour, if I don’t do ‘this,’ then I’ll have that hour to spend with my family,” he offers as an example. Here are some scenarios that illustrate how opportunity cost applies to time management.

- Your medical assistant asks if the front desk can add on two patients at the end of the morning. If you say yes, you won’t have time for lunch.

- You’re invited to serve on the search committee to hire a new CEO for your local hospital. You are honored to be asked, and you have a vested interest in making sure the right person is selected; but this commitment would cut into your patient care hours for at least a few months.

- Your son desperately wants you to help coach his soccer team this season, but you have agreed to work with two colleagues on an important research project.

“We have all kinds of obligations in our lives that we think we have to do,” says Mr. Bohl. “Take a look at your commitments. Do I really have to be on this board? How many office locations do I need? Should I serve at this college?” Applying the theory of opportunity cost goes back to having an ability to clearly respond to the “yes-versus-no” question. Mr. Bohl contends that individuals often bow to other people’s expectations unnecessarily. “I must have been asked to do this because someone thinks I have something to bring to the party, and I don’t want to let them down,” he offers as a common belief. “You may have the skills and may be of value, but you have to go back to your own values to make the decision,” says Mr. Bohl.