



## Gimme a Break

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I rediscovered the simple, profound power of taking breaks while battling through an episode of burnout. So striking was the transformation in how I felt about my clinical life that I was compelled to explore the science behind the value of taking breaks.

As providers, we have a paucity of natural break opportunities. There is always another patient to see, a note to finish, and an inbox of results to sift through. Additionally and importantly, we have an uphill battle should we have the audacity to actually take a break because there is an undeniable culture among clinicians to *simply push through*. Many clinicians bristle at the very notion of pausing, believing that a break will slow them down, keep patients waiting, and keep them at work longer.

However, abundant research in organizational psychology shows that our cognitive effectiveness is not fixed throughout the workday because *mental vigilance wanes due to decision fatigue—the cumulative cognitive toll of the thousands of decisions, large and small, we make every shift*. We become mentally drained, our mood worsens, and ultimately our decision-making faculties deteriorate. Multiple studies demonstrate that patients seen in the afternoon simply do worse: more unnecessary antibiotics in outpatient clinics, more adverse anesthesia events in operating rooms, and more missed polyps on colonoscopies.

We have an ethical obligation to mitigate the ill effects of decision fatigue. *Fortunately, there is a simple solution. A few short breaks per day will do the trick.*

This sounds simple enough, but the logistical challenges are many. Physical spaces conducive to pausing are not commonplace. In addition, taking time for breaks may make you stand out among your colleagues (like that sore thumb you're not taking care of right away while taking a breather). Rest assured, though, that taking breaks will make work less tedious and more enjoyable, actually improve our efficiency, and make us safer clinicians.



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Here are some tips for implementing breaks into your shifts: *Realize that breaks needn't be long.* A "microbreak" (1-2 minutes) every 2 hours is sufficient and much more practical than longer breaks.

*Really unplug.* Unfocused attention, or allowing the so-called "default mode network" to operate, is more restorative than logging into social media or checking email.

*Rediscover nature.* Getting some fresh air, even for a few minutes, has been shown to improve mood and reduce stress. Even looking out the window at the trees seems to confer similar benefits.

*Talk to people (and not about work).* Social interaction, which differs from goal-directed clinical interactions, is mentally restorative. Bonus: Getting to know your coworkers better improves team dynamics and effectiveness.

*Meditate.* Mindfulness practice improves what psychologists call "cognitive inhibition," which refers to our ability to tune out irrelevant stimuli. Get an app like One Minute Meditation, Headspace, or Calm. Close your eyes and just focus on your breath for several minutes.

*Get a tea or coffee (and water).* Change the scenery. Stay hydrated. Recaffeinate. What's not to love?

*Get physical.* There is an immediate boost in cognitive performance following short bursts of intense exercise. You can reap the benefits with simple calisthenics like push-ups, jumping jacks, and lunges. I go our staff locker room for 2 minutes every 2 hours. I meditate for 60 seconds, followed by 30 seconds each of jumping jacks and squats. Then, I take a big swig of water and head back out, always with renewed motivation and mental clarity.

After you begin to take breaks, you'll recognize when you're cognitively fatigued more readily and also have tools to address it. You will find the workday becomes transformed from one long slog to a series of manageable episodes, each with a fresh start boost.

For our sake and that of our patients, we need to change provider culture from the *push through it* mindset to one which acknowledges that we're human and need breaks to perform optimally. And you'll probably find, by taking a few breaks per shift, that you enjoy your job much more in the process. ■