

Finding Joy in Our Daily Radiology Job

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Completing our training and starting our jobs may feel like the climax of our career. After years of studying and passing tests, we are finally done. The first 3-6 months as practicing radiologists are an exciting period of adaptation, in which we build up our confidence as independent practitioners of image-guided procedures and final signers of our reports.

But soon, the thrill of the initial stage has passed, our certifying exam is behind us, and we settle into our new, daily routine. Suddenly we may find ourselves feeling unsettled, wondering how to find joy and purpose in our daily work.

The medical education system trains us to feel accomplishment by successfully passing from one stage of schooling to the next. We immerse ourselves in passing board exams and applying to college, medical school, residency, and fellowship. Our limbic system becomes accustomed to the continuous cycle of examinations, from SAT, to MCAT, to USMLE, to Core exams. Once we've passed these milestones and become radiologists, we may surprise ourselves by missing the dopamine surges of grades and evaluations. The daily routine of our work, despite the diagnostic challenges, may feel more robotic and less fulfilling than we imagined.

As new attendings, we soon face other realities. Joining the radiology workforce opens our eyes to aspects of healthcare economics that we may not have appreciated during training. Staffing shortages result in higher imaging volumes than we expected. Meeting RVU targets and other productivity metrics feels at odds with the way we envisioned our careers in medicine.

We may be surprised, so early in our careers, to already feel disillusioned or even feelings of burnout. So, how do we address these feelings and find joy in our work?

Our new attending salary, after years of medical student tuition and low-paying training programs, may provide an initial sense of

satisfaction, but it is quickly fleeting. Psychologists describe this phenomenon as the hedonic treadmill model. Positive or negative life events temporarily affect our happiness. But those effects fade over time and we return to baseline.¹

Maintaining the joy we experience in our daily work requires more than material rewards; it requires satisfying our personal sense of purpose. We must balance short-lived experiences linked to "hedonic well-being" with longer-term practices linked to "eudaimonic well-being," the sense of meaning that results from realizing one's potential.² In other words, we must remind ourselves of the reasons we became physicians and keep that fire burning through mindful reflection and intentional action.

As a form of meditation, mindfulness has been found to have a positive and direct association with eudaimonic well-being.³ Mindfulness is the practice of maintaining a state of heightened, non-judgmental awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences,⁴ which may reduce stress, depression, and anxiety.⁵

Amidst the stress of high volumes of work, we can focus our awareness on the ways our work can elevate patient care. Every single image we interpret and procedure we perform has an impact on patient outcomes. Even when we are not directly interacting with patients or clinicians, our work plays a central role on the care team.⁶

Outside the workplace, we can find well-being through our interactions with family and friends and by prioritizing our personal health. We may reconnect to our purpose as physicians by getting out of the darkness of our reading room and involving ourselves in medical/radiological societies, global health organizations, or patient advocacy.

Sometimes, the solution to burnout can be taking a sabbatical. Owen and Owen were early-career radiologists who took an unpaid 6-month sabbatical to travel around the world with their 3 children of ages 10, 12, and 14. They describe returning to their academic

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radiology jobs with a “new appreciation for how good our lives are and how lucky we are to have fulfilling careers.”⁷

Finally, if the culture of our practice no longer aligns with our purpose, it may be time to find a better fit and to know we are not alone in making that decision. Radiologist turnover rates were 61.2% higher in the 2020-2022 period versus 2013. Turnover rates were higher for female radiologists, those in metropolitan areas, and those with fewer years of practice.⁸

Burnout rates have been substantial even among the most resilient physicians.⁹ Whatever strategies we ultimately choose to help us find joy, our first step should be an acknowledgment that our feelings are common and do not reflect personal failure. The next step is recognition that joy is possible, and that the pathway to finding it will be different for every individual.

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