



From Passion to Exhaustion: The Struggles of Modern Surgeons

Dheeraj Makkar*

Department of Orthopedics, Emory University, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Dheeraj Makkar, Department of Orthopedics, Emory University, USA.

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A few months ago, I met a medical student named Sophie during a conference, whose story left a profound impact on me. She was an aspiring orthopedic surgeon, eager to follow in the footsteps of those she admired. But as we spoke, it became clear that her enthusiasm for orthopedics was waning. Sophie confided in me that her newborn had been struggling with health complications, and the emotional toll was taking a toll on her physical and mental well-being. The relentless demands of her studies, coupled with the constant worry for her child, made her question whether this path was truly worth it. She spoke of her struggles with burnout: the exhaustion, the emotional detachment, and the sense of being caught between her personal life and professional aspirations.

Her story resonated deeply with me. I couldn't help but reflect on how common burnout was among medical professionals, especially in specialties like orthopedics, where the pressures are unrelenting. Sophie's dilemma made me delve deeper into the causes and effects of burnout in surgery. It also sparked an editorial that I believe every physician, and particularly surgeons, should read to understand this critical issue more profoundly.

Burnout—marked by emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion—has become a widespread consequence of today's fast-paced, high-pressure society. Physicians are far from exempt, and in orthopedics, the risk is particularly high. Persistent clinical demands, rising malpractice pressures, eroding public trust, bureaucratic burdens, reduced autonomy, and aggressive media scrutiny have created a perfect storm. As a result, orthopedic surgeons are increasingly vulnerable to this silent but serious epidemic.

Burnout reflects more than fatigue—it signals an identity crisis. Many physicians enter the profession driven by values that now feel disregarded. When stress overwhelms fulfillment and values are compromised, burnout takes hold. Emotional exhaustion arises from relentless demands, poor working conditions, administrative overreach, and litigation fears. This often leads to depersonalization—an emotional detachment that serves as self-protection but erodes empathy and judgment. Eventually, a loss of personal accomplishment sets in, as physicians question their ability to deliver meaningful care. Together, these forces dismantle not just well-being, but the very essence of the medical vocation.

A Crisis rooted in structure

Burnout in surgery stems from six interwoven risk factors: intense workloads, emotional strain, loss of autonomy, poor workplace relationships, value conflicts, and job insecurity. In orthopedics, the first two—demanding schedules and constant emotional engagement—are particularly pronounced. Administrative pressures further erode autonomy, while lack of support, recognition, and purpose amplify distress. A landmark American College of Surgeons survey revealed burnout in 40% of respondents and depression symptoms in nearly one-third. Alarming, the suicide rate among surgeons is nearly double that of the general population, with female surgeons and dual-surgeon households at even greater risk. These numbers expose a silent epidemic—one driven not by personal weakness, but by systemic dysfunction.

The hidden costs of surgical excellence

Burnout among orthopedic surgeons is both widespread and deeply rooted in the profession's demands. Surgeons working over

80 hours per week or taking frequent night calls show markedly higher rates of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, medical errors, and family conflict. A staggering 38–56% of orthopedic surgeons and residents report burnout, with work-related stress bleeding heavily into personal life. Factors such as harassment, sleep deprivation, poor workplace relationships, and financial pressure fuel this crisis. The global data make one thing clear: burnout isn't a personal failing—it's a systemic issue demanding collective action.

Burnout: The slow collapse of the committed

Burnout rarely arrives overnight—it creeps in, stage by stage. It often begins in the Honeymoon Phase, where enthusiasm masks the strain of new roles. As stress takes root, self-care wanes and symptoms like insomnia, anxiety, and fatigue emerge (Stage 2: Onset). Chronic stress follows, marked by withdrawal, resentment, and numbing behaviors (Stage 3). In full-blown Burnout (Stage 4), physical ailments, cynicism, and emotional detachment set in. Eventually, Habitual Burnout leads to persistent sadness and possible depression.

Though work is the usual suspect—marked by chaos, monotony, or lack of agency—burnout is just as much about lifestyle and personality. Isolation, sleep deprivation, and perfectionism silently fan the flames. It's not simply a matter of workload; it's about the erosion of meaning, control, and human connection in our everyday lives.

Preventing burnout: Proactive strategies for a healthier you

Burnout is a progressive state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged stress. Often creeping in quietly, it can go unnoticed until it significantly impacts well-being. Recognizing the signs early and implementing mindful, proactive strategies can protect your mental health and help you thrive.

Normalize seeking professional support

There is no weakness in asking for help—just strength in self-awareness. If feelings of burnout persist, consulting a therapist or counselor can provide effective, personalized coping strategies. Removing the stigma around mental health support is the first step toward real healing.

Foster supportive relationships

Engage in genuine conversations with friends, family, or colleagues. A strong social network offers emotional relief, practical advice, and a reminder that you're not alone.

Establish clear work-life boundaries

Define your work hours and stick to them. Prioritize personal time, disconnect from work emails after hours, and learn to say “no” to non-essential responsibilities.

Reassess personal goals and priorities

Burnout often stems from chasing goals that no longer align with your values. Take time to reflect, reset, and realign your personal and professional aspirations to what truly matters.

Incorporate regular physical activity

Exercise isn't just for fitness—it's a powerful mood stabilizer. Whether it's walking, yoga, or swimming, consistent movement reduces stress and enhances overall energy.

Maintain a balanced diet

What you eat fuels how you feel. Choose whole foods rich in omega-3s, fiber, and lean protein. Limit sugar, processed foods, and excessive caffeine to support sustained mental and physical vitality.

Practice mindfulness and relaxation techniques

Meditation, deep breathing, or journaling can bring calm to chaos. Just a few minutes a day can increase resilience, reduce anxiety, and center your focus.

Conclusion

Sophie's story is a stark reminder that burnout isn't an isolated experience—it's a growing epidemic. As physicians and surgeons, we must take responsibility for our mental health, challenge the system, and adopt preventive strategies to protect our well-being. Burnout is not a personal failing but a reflection of structural flaws that must be addressed. With proactive care, support systems, and a shift in priorities, we can emerge from this crisis stronger, more resilient, and more connected to the values that first drew us to medicine.