

How medical residents can make the most of their time off

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As a resident, the demands of your weekly schedule can be jarring. But one perk—particularly when juxtaposed with life as a medical student—is the opportunity to make use of paid vacation time.

Residency programs typically offer between two and four weeks of vacation, with the flexibility to schedule them increasing as residents advance in their training. We spoke with residents about how they make the most of their extended time away from the hospital and clinic.

Find time for family

You are not going to be able to make every holiday—some years you might not make any. Still, planning and communicating with your family members can give you some time to relax while surrounded by parents, siblings, nieces and nephews.

“If I do have a week of vacation, I make sure to maximize time with my family,” said Taylor George, MD, a second-year emergency medicine resident at the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Virginia. “So I oftentimes will try to coordinate going on vacation with my brother and seeing my parents. That, to me, is really important. You don’t have as much flexibility to visit family as you did previously, so planning ahead is a must.”

The time off is rejuvenating, Dr. George said.

“I often find myself excited to come back to work because the pace change can be so jarring to go from being on 100 percent on all of the time at work to go to this relaxing week,” she said.

Pursue your passions

Early in her residency, Tani Malhotra, MD, was surprised to experience frustration and burnout. One of the many coping mechanisms she identified to help her find more satisfaction in the hospital was to be proactive in advocating for patients and physicians outside of it. “The months of December to February every year, I feel more burned out than any other time of year,” said Dr. Malhotra, who is finishing her stint as a chief resident in the ob-gyn program at York Hospital in central Pennsylvania. “I just feel a little bit tired with the work and run down and usually a second wind comes once the weather starts to get better.

“For me one of the things that has helped is I almost always get out of town at the end of January,” she added. “That’s usually when I attend the national conference for [the Society of Maternal Fetal Medicine]. It takes me out of the rut of the same old bread and butter. It gives you the opportunity to learn new things and meet people. It breaks me out of the routine. What also helps is that these conferences are usually in warmer cities.”

Get creative with your calendar

In some instances, you are simply not going to be able to get an entire week off when you need it. That doesn’t mean you have to miss out on a life milestone, however. If you are willing to sacrifice a little sleep, an in-and-out trip can allow you to be there for the most important moments.

“My sister’s high school graduation was a big deal to her,” said MohammedMoiz Qureshi, MD, a second-year emergency medicine resident at Penn State’s Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. “She told me this last year, before I started my residency. So I made the time. Her graduation was on a Sunday. I worked a shift on Saturday, got into St. Louis at midnight the night before. Her graduation was first thing in the morning, then we went to dinner to celebrate. My flight out was at 5 a.m. Monday morning, and I was at home around noon to work a shift around 3 o’clock. I was home for 36 hours, and it was an expensive trip.

“It gets exhausting, working the day you’re flying out and coming back takes a lot out of you,” Dr. Qureshi said. “But the things that are important to you, you try to swing.”