For three in five medical residents, nonclinical concerns such as work-life balance, time pressures or debt represent their biggest challenge in training. That compares with less than 40 percent of residents who say the biggest worry relates to traditional clinical matters such as the fear of making a serious mistake or concern about developing the skills they need to thrive in their chosen specialty.

These findings, included in a survey of more than 1,900 residents across 29 specialties, show how much off-the-job issues continue to press on physicians-in-training.

According to the survey, the top six challenges faced in years one through four of medical residency are:

- Work-life balance—33 percent.
- Dealing with the time pressures—17 percent.
- Fear of failure or making a serious mistake—15 percent.
- Developing the clinical skills required for the specialty—10 percent.
- Debt—10 percent.
- Dealing with the stress—8 percent.

The residents surveyed listed work schedule and call hours as the most important factor they will consider when looking for their first job. Three in four residents cited that work-life balance category as a key factor in their future employment. That criterion beat out starting salary (cited by 66 percent of respondents) and compensation and a supportive organizational and practice environment (49 percent) as influencers in deciding on a post-residency position.

In terms of burnout, 64 percent of respondents said that a manageable call schedule and work hours would help them relieve burnout.

The “Medscape Residents Lifestyle & Happiness Report 2018” includes some other interesting nuggets.
Seeing the bright side: Despite the time demands of residency, the survey revealed a general optimism among residents. Nearly 90 percent of respondents said they were still looking forward to being a doctor. Three-quarters of survey respondents also called the clinical knowledge and experience they are gaining the most rewarding part of being a doctor.

Meeting expectations: While residents may feel their schedules are stretched, that seems to align with what most expected coming into their training. When asked whether the balance between their personal and professional lives is what they expected, about half of residents said “it was neither better nor worse.” A quarter responded that the balance was “somewhat or much better” than expected.

Struggling to stay well: Forty-six percent of residents surveyed said they “sometimes” had enough time for personal wellness. Thirty-five percent responded that they rarely or never have enough time. About half of residents said they “sometimes” have enough time for a satisfying social life.

The AMA offers a variety of tools and resources to help residents. In the AMA's "Making the Rounds" podcast, AMA senior attorney Wes Cleveland provides tips on what to consider in the contracting process. The STEPS Forward™ collection’s educational modules help prevent physician burnout; topics include physician wellness and improving resilience.