

The Time Trap Worksheet

What we know about Burnout

Research shows that many professions, including medical ones, experience stress and burnout. For surgeons, there are many reasons for this, but some of the most common causes include:

- Increasing patient workload in both private and public practice
- Patient expectations that have increased due to social media and other public pressures
- Administration and bureaucracy that is increasing in most countries
- External pressure that can include regulators, public health bodies, and the media
- And surgical complexity that requires ongoing training to stay abreast of new techniques

Yet despite these pressures, surgeons must continue to deliver excellent patient care and reliable patient outcomes, all the while successfully leading their teams and their practices. As the profession continues to evolve, the potential for greater stress and burnout is being magnified.

Research from Healthcare

ISAPS professionals have contributed to the research on this topic, showing that stress and burnout are significant risk factors for surgeons, and plastic surgeons in particular. Dr. Gregory Evans, ISAPS Member, Professor of Surgery and Biomedical Engineering, and Director for the American Board of Plastic Surgery, has published papers in the *Aesthetic Surgery Journal* suggesting that over 40% of US surgeons experience burnout (*Burnout in the Plastic Surgeon: Implications and Interventions*, G. Evans et al. 27 Sept 2016).

In this research, symptoms of burnout are defined as the presence of three conditions:

- Emotional Exhaustion (from excessive emotional demands)
- Depersonalization (cynical, negative, or detached responses to patient care)
- Reduced Personal Accomplishment (belief that one can no longer work effectively)

Clearly, these symptoms can deeply affect surgeon effectiveness and personal wellness.

Research from Business

There are also many consultants and professional coaches who routinely advise professionals on the topic of burnout. One such firm, *Tonic 365* of the UK, lists some of the most common causes of stress and burnout among working adults, including:

- Work Pressure
- Lack of Time
- Excessive Travel

- Lack of Facilities
- Lack of Motivation
- Boredom (with routines or small tasks)
- Inconsistency (mismatched expectations compared with actual work outputs)
- Family Commitments (including both children and elderly parents)

Jeff Archer, MD at *Tonic 365*, also challenges his clients to interrogate their level of “agency” around these issues. In other words, is the list above a series of real barriers to wellness, or are some items self-imposed, or even invented as excuses to avoid tackling difficulty? Either way, these challenges feel real to busy professionals and can be significant sources of stress and burnout. So the question is, what can we do about them?

The Time Trap

Better awareness of time and priorities can help manage stress and burnout. This simple tool is based on well-established prioritization methods that seek to help leaders focus on truly important activities, while deliberately stopping ones that don’t add value.

Most stress and burnout among professionals result from a sense of overload, having too much to do, and not enough time or resources. A simple prioritization exercise that deliberately eliminates some activity by freeing time for more strategic things can eliminate an important source of stress. It is more difficult than it seems because we are pushed to overfill our diaries through a combination of:

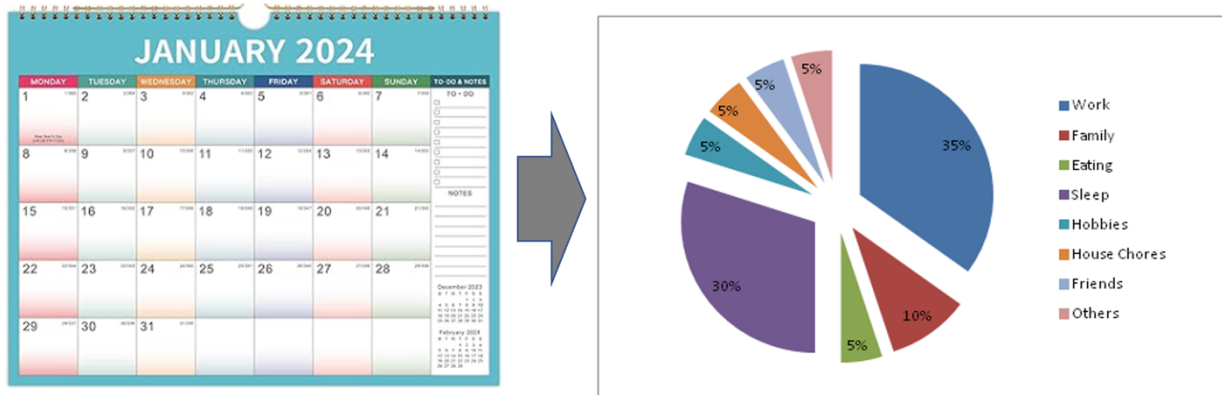
- Wanting to be helpful
- Wanting to do the “right thing”
- Wanting to ensure the best work outcomes and patient results
- Pressure from peers or teams who expect us to be deliver “beyond expectations”
- Personal ambition as we build our careers and profiles
- Feelings of guilt or frustration if any of the above conditions do not occur!

Self Assessment

To measure your ability to prioritize and change your work patterns, follow these steps:

1. Take your diary over the last week or month
2. Identify the main categories of work and non-work, from routines to more strategic actions
3. Analyze your current time use in hours and allocate them to your categories
4. Calculate each category as a percentage of your actual time spent (weekly or monthly)
5. Be ruthlessly honest, especially in areas like administration which we tend to underestimate!

Your results may look something like this:



Next, reflect on your current priorities – what really matters to you at work and in your personal life? Try and answer these three questions:

1. What are your most important personal and professional goals?
2. What tasks materially contribute to these?
3. What tasks detract from these or have become sources of stress for other reasons?

Actions you can Take

After reflecting on what you want to do more or less of, define some clear actions in three categories:

- **Stop:** This is the art of subtraction, saying no to certain things and making sure this frees up time
- **Start:** This is the importance of forming new habits and making sure these support your key goals
- **Continue:** This is the importance of continuing to do what you do well and leveraging strengths

Key Takeaways

- Research shows that most adults spend less than 5% of their time on the truly important things
- The idea that our diaries fill up without us controlling the process is mainly a myth
- Most adults can take control of their diaries and their work routines if they really want to
- The key is to take the time to properly analyze your use of time and then make a plan to change

Questions for Reflection

- What is your current allocation of time across your various work and life categories?
- Does this match your desires, or are there some major mismatches that are causing stress?
- What specific tasks and actions you can stop without major consequences on your work or life?
- What could be the impact on your stress and burnout levels if you better prioritized your time?
- What is the cost of not changing, and how might this affect you over the longer term?