

Before We Begin

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Obstetrician/Gynecologists (Ob/Gyns) are surgeons. Much of our work is done within the unique environment of the operating room (OR); a space that has its own rules of engagement. It is a dynamic environment which necessitates the seamless cooperation of different members of the health-care team, often integrating trainees, and at the same time depends on the mastery and command of the surgeon. The OR is tenuous, where something can change any moment – injury, hemorrhage, patient decompensation – leading to a bad outcome.

Psychological and psychosocial physician stress can occur due to the direct responsibility for patient well-being, including the emotional toll of surgery such as bad outcomes and patient death. Each traumatic event, paired with other demands of being a physician today, creates a downstream effect of additional challenges. Burnout, for example, has personal consequences for physicians that can include decreased productivity, job dissatisfaction, risk for motor vehicle accidents, poor self-care, depression, substance abuse, and suicidality.¹ To ensure a sustainable and enduring career, there is a benefit to physicians integrating daily wellness practices into their medical practice to create a buffer to these known hazards. The unique stress of our work within the OR calls for incredible focus and resilience, and the Ob/Gyn surgeon is uniquely situated to bring that focus and resilience into the OR for the entire team with simple wellness practices.

All they need to do, in fact, is breathe. Practice mindful breathing, that is. Mindful breathing refers to intentionally focusing one's attention on the breath in a non-judgmental and present-moment way. It involves bringing awareness to the sensations, rhythm, and quality of the breath while letting go of distractions and thoughts.² Mindful breathing can be done through various techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, box breathing, breath counting, or focused breathing awareness. Such breathing has proven beneficial for physical and mental well-being as it can successfully lower anxiety, depression, and distress.³⁻⁷ Mindful breathing has a known positive impact on physical health, which includes improved circulatory and respiratory function, reduction of pain, and improved sleep.⁸⁻¹⁰ The beauty of breathing is that it is incredibly simple, yet a powerful tool for enhancing overall mental health and wellness. It is readily available to individuals and can be practiced in various settings.

To harness this tool, all that is required is intentionality and a moment to pause and engage in one of the numerous methods of mindful breathing.

And the Ob/Gyn surgeon, the lead individual in that complex OR environment, can bring the intentionality of integrating this wellness technique into their everyday medical practice in a way that affects the entire OR team. Many years ago I decided to try it out. And I'm still doing it with every OR case.

We roll to the OR, transfer the patient to the table, and do the time out. The team is abuzz with preparation and anticipation. I stand at the bedside for the induction of anesthesia. I might remember a bad outcome, anticipate a difficult case, hold stress from the day. My heart rate might rise. I scrub in and we do the second time out. And then we breathe, the entire team, together. "And we will take two mindful breaths before we start." We pause to take a mindful breath in, and then out. And a second one, in and out. The clamor of the PACU washes away. My heart rate slows. Anxiety, anticipation and stress lessen. All at once, the team is synchronized. The patient and our work come into focus, recentered. And then we begin.

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Disclosures

None.

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