

Redefining Renewal for Physicians

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January is supposed to feel like a clean slate. New calendars, fresh goals, “this is the year I finally...,” but for many physicians, the first weeks of the year don’t feel new at all. The inbox is still full, patient panels are still complex, systems are overly strained, and the pace rarely lets up long enough to “start over.”

For us, we hear a common theme: “I don’t need a whole new life; I just need my life to feel a little more sustainable.” With that in mind, we invite you to think of “new beginnings” in 2026 not as a dramatic reinvention, but as small, realistic shifts that honor the person behind the white coat.

Redefining “New” so it’s Actually Doable

Many physicians are wired for high achievement. The same drive that got you through medical training can turn against you at the beginning of the year, when resolutions become one more impossible standard.

Instead of asking, “How can I become a better version of myself this year?” It may be more helpful to ask, “What would make my daily life 5–10% more compassionate?” It can look like this:

- Protecting ones consistent, non-negotiable pocket of time each week that is not available for any forms of communication.
- Choosing one professional boundary to practice more intentionally, such as limiting after-hours work email.
- Letting go of a self-expectation that no longer fits, like saying “yes” to every opportunity or committee.

These smaller pivots are more sustainable than grand resolutions, and over time, they can change how your work feels from the inside out.

Self-Criticism to Self-Compassion

Physicians are often far kinder to

patients than to themselves. When something goes wrong, many default to self-criticism: “I should have caught that. I should have handled that better. I should be coping better.”

Research on clinician well-being continues to highlight the role of self-compassion in protecting against burnout and moral distress. Self-compassion is not about lowering standards; it’s about acknowledging that you are human, practicing medicine within imperfect systems, and doing the best you can with the information and resources available to you.

Over time, shifting from self-blame to self-compassion can decrease emotional exhaustion and increase the capacity to stay present with patients and families.

Small Rituals to Ground a Demanding Day

When schedules are full and demands are constant, it can feel unrealistic to add anything more to your day — even wellness practices. Instead of imagining long morning routines or hour-long mindfulness sessions, consider micro-rituals that fit into the realities of clinical life:

- A 30-second pause before opening the exam room door to take a slow breath and mentally arrive.
- A brief transition ritual after leaving the hospital or clinic — such as a sentence that marks the shift from physician mode to home mode.
- A two-minute end-of-day check-in: one thing handled well, one thing to release.

These small practices will not remove systemic pressures, but they can help your nervous system find brief moments of reset in the middle of it all.

Reconnecting with Meaning

Many physicians find that what sustains them is connection and meaning — a shared laugh with a colleague, a patient who circles back to say thank you, or a moment when a

difficult conversation goes just a little better than expected.

Making space for peer connection — through a quick check-in with a trusted colleague, a peer group, or a text thread that can hold honest moments.

Noticing small moments of meaning and letting them land: the patient who finally feels heard, the family supported in grief, or the trainee who grew under your guidance.

Remembering that your worth isn’t defined solely by productivity metrics or patient satisfaction scores. Re-anchoring to purpose and connection doesn’t erase stress, but it can soften the isolation that often accompanies it.

Beginning Again, without Starting Over

A new beginning might be as simple as deciding, “For the next three patients, I will slow my pace by 10%,” or “For the next week, I will leave the clinic on time one day, even if it means some notes wait until tomorrow.”

These choices are not selfish; they are an investment in your capacity to continue practicing the medicine you care about.

You do not need a different life to have a new beginning in 2026. You only need a few compassionate, intentional shifts that make it more possible to stay well while you continue to care so deeply for others. ♦

As Joyful Living Behavioral Health partners with the Lane County Medical Society through the Physician Wellness Program (PWP), we are honored to support physicians in finding their own sustainable ways forward through confidential, no-cost counseling and a space designed specifically for you as a physician — not just as a provider of care. Information about accessing the PWP is available through the LCMS website. We encourage you to consider it as one more tool in your wellness toolkit.