



## **EPISODE 74 Is it bad to take a break between jobs?**

**Dr. Heather Fork**

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HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello, hello and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. You're listening to episode number 74. Before we dive into our topic for today, I wanted to let you know that I recorded a short video about my new LinkedIn course for physicians. It's under five minutes and it gives you a sneak peek inside. I show you the different modules, an example of what a typical video lesson looks like.

If you'd like to watch this video, you can find it on the [doctorscrossing.com](http://doctorscrossing.com) website. Simply go to the products tab at the top of the page and select the LinkedIn course. I'll also put a link in the show notes that will take you right there. This course is great if you want to optimize your LinkedIn profile, learn how to network effectively and search for and apply to jobs strategically.

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All right, onto the show. In last week's episode, we looked at this question of whether you should make sure to have a job lined up before you quit. As we talked about, the answer really is an individual one, with no one right answer, and depends on a number of factors.

Now, some physicians really don't want to have that job lined up, but they want to take a break. But they may be concerned about the implications of not being in a job and having a gap on their resumes.

Today I want to talk about the pros and cons of taking a break between jobs and how to minimize any potential liabilities. I think this is such an important topic because we're wired to keep going to stay on that hamster wheel. And we often are risk averse and not having a job feels very risky. There also may be the reality that we're the breadwinner of the family and we can't take much of a break. We can't lose that paycheck.

I want to talk about it and help you think about this as maybe being a possibility if it's something you really want to do, but you are thinking it's just not going to happen, or it's just not doable. And I've seen so many benefits coming out of when you can take that time away that you need. We're often so burned out. We've been going since we were in high school, we're on this conveyor belt and two weeks isn't going to do it. Often a month isn't going to be enough.

Many of you are feeling really exhausted and broken. You may have physical issues, maybe really straining your relationships and your family situation. And sometimes we really just need to get away. I'm here to try to help you think through this process, if it's something that could be useful for you.

I want to start with just a couple examples of physicians sticking time off. The first one is a physician who was in clinical practice and ended up going into a nonclinical job. She is a primary care physician and she'd been in practice about 10 years when she reached

out to me. She was really good at planning. So, she said, “Heather, I'm very burned out, but I don't know if I just need a different clinical job or if a nonclinical job is going to be the answer. I do know that before I take another job, I want to have a full year off.”

This was very clear to her. She had already gone and done her board recertification to make sure that was taken care of. And what we did was we did coaching together to get her to the point where she was able to decide that “No, another clinical job wasn't going to be the answer.” She needed a nonclinical job. And we explored a number of different options that she narrowed them down, but she didn't actually go and apply. But she had a lot of good work already done so that when she went on this break, she could have freedom to know that when she was ready to resume this process, she had already done a lot of the groundwork.

She took that year off. And then when it was getting close to the end of it, she came back to me and we finalized which kind of job she wanted to apply for. She applied to one company, she interviewed, they knew she had this gap. She talked about what she did during this time, and they didn't have an issue with it. She got hired and that's been a couple years now and she's still doing well at that job. When we talk in a little bit about the pros and cons of leaving and having a break and how to minimize the liabilities, I'll talk to you about how she addressed that gap.

Our next example is one of a physician who was clinical, who took a break and then determined that she wanted to stay clinical, but it needed to be a different kind of situation. This is a surgeon who had been in practice for a good number of years before she reached out to me. She was really suffering and she shared some thoughts about that time with me recently that she said I could read to you on the podcast. So let me read to you what she wrote.

“The break saved my life. Not only my career, but my life. I needed the rest, the physical rest to heal from the exhaustion and physical issues that working in this way was doing



to me. More importantly, I needed mental rest. I was so burned out and at empathy fatigue. I didn't have the same concern for patients that I always had in the past. They were one more burden to bear, one more person or situation that needed resources and time I didn't have.

The other benefit was I realized that I was surrounded by toxic partners. Stepping away allowed me at first, time to just not have to deal with the toxicity. But then it also gave me time to work on boundaries and self-respect. It also helped me realize I still want to operate, but be in control of my schedule and to have a way better work life balance and boundaries. This time has been priceless.”

She took about a six-month break and she's going to be working part-time as a surgeon in a job that is limited in scope to the kind of cases that she would prefer to be doing. Now, you heard her words and it's really heartbreaking to me that physicians and the capacity of caring for the health of patients are seriously compromised in their own health often because of the situation that they're put in. It's really something that's shameful about the practice of medicine. And this is not hyperbole. I have witnessed what she's gone through and it's really disturbing. I know she's not the only one. If you're in this kind of situation, I hope that you can get out of it because it's very dysfunctional and we've often normalized dysfunction.

The third example I wanted to share is of a physician who was working clinically, took a break and then went in an entrepreneurial direction. And if you'll humor me, I was just going to share very briefly my story, which is that I was in practice for nine years. And then I sold the practice and I went off into the country, lived in this cabin. And over a period of two years, I figured out that I wanted to go into coaching. And then I started this coaching business.

When I left medicine, I knew I did not want to continue practicing clinically, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. I absolutely had no idea I was going to go into coaching or be



an entrepreneur. I just had this feeling that if I tried to go into something right away, I was going to make a mistake. I think it would've been really helpful if I had known any physicians who had transitioned and someone to talk to who had been through this process, because other than talking to family members and friends, no one really kind of knew what I was doing. I didn't know what I was doing.

But when I looked back in hindsight, it worked. And I think one of the reasons why it worked was because I had this time and space to reconnect with sort of who I was, because I think when I went in the direction of becoming a physician, that wasn't really right for me. And even though there were a lot of things about it that I liked, I think what can happen when you're out of alignment with yourself for a while, just like when you're driving a car and if the steering wheel is a couple degrees off from where you really want to go, you can get pretty far away from your original destination.

I think that time and space, not immediately going into something else enabled me to slowly sort of reconnect with who I was and go in the direction that was really ultimately going to be the path that was meant for me.

After this time period where I was doing volunteering and I was out in the country and I was also doing some meditation and a spiritual practice. When I was really ready to find the next thing, and I made that commitment and I said, "Okay, I'm ready for the next thing" I knew in two weeks. Then I went to coaching training, and then I started this business.

I just really share that to say that sometimes you can't figure out plan B while you're in plan A. You may need to have a gap time. That segues into the next part, which is looking at the pros of taking a break. We've already discussed a number of them. A big one being you get to step away from practice to truthfully answer that question of, "Do I still want to practice as a doctor in the traditional sense?"



It can give you time for healing. A lot of us may have a broken heart from feeling like the practice of medicine isn't what we thought it was going to be. And you go through a grieving period and it takes time to really come to grips with that reality. There can be the physical, mental, emotional healing that needs to take place.

A break can be just what you need to reconnect with your family. You might have just had a baby, or you have young children that you really haven't gotten to spend time with. And that's hard on you. There may be an elderly parent or a child with special needs, or there's so many different reasons why we want to spend our time in a certain way, and it may not be at our job.

And as I mentioned for myself, an advantage can be giving yourself a break to not make a hasty decision. Not just jump out of the fire into the frying pan, but really have time to reevaluate what you want to move towards and not just what you want to move away from.

You can also have this time to look for a job and be able to interview and travel to interviews and go through the job search process, which can be a full-time job. It could be the difference between not taking a break and getting into the wrong job, and then having to do it all over again, versus taking some time off and really going through a thoughtful process and making a really good decision for yourself.

Now, let's look at the cons or the potential disadvantages when you do take a break and also how to mitigate any negative effects. A big one that comes up is if you're taking a long break is having a clinical gap. This is not usually an issue if it's six months or so. Depending on your specialty, when it gets to be a year or longer, sometimes there are some issues, but for most specialties you can be out for two years, and it's not a big deal to get back in, but I think it's good to just find out what's true for your specialty before planning a big break.



It's also really good to check with your licensing board, the board certification. It's also good to look into your state licensure and see if there's any issues there with being out of practice.

My client who took that one year off, she made sure to renew her board certification before she had that gap year. I recommend keeping everything current until you know 100% that you're not going to need it. There are a lot of nonclinical jobs where they want you to have an active license and a number of them where they want you to have current board certification. So don't give those up easily and make sure you keep them current.

Now, one thing that you can do is potentially some locum tenens, some telemedicine, because that can help keep your clinical time clock spinning. And you don't necessarily have to do very much of it.

One of my friends is doing some local dermatology, locums. She has a friend who could use some coverage and then she doesn't have to travel. So don't necessarily think that if you're doing locums, you have to be away from your family. You could still have a lot of time off, do a little bit of locums and not have that big issue of a clinical gap.

If you've been out for a long time, there are the reentry programs and retraining is possible. I know physicians who've been out five years, 12 years who have come back. I also read about a physician who was out 20 years in internal medicine and came back. If this is your situation, never say the door is closed. If you want to come back, give yourself the opportunity to explore the different pathways for that. I have a podcast that's on reentry that you can listen to.

The next big con of course is loss of potential income. I think this is what scares a lot of physicians from taking a break, but with some planning and looking at the numbers,



talking with your spouse or partner, if that's applicable, I think you may have more wiggle room potentially than you think.

If you take the long view of your whole career span and income earning potential, sometimes that gap of three months or six months looks a lot smaller in retrospect to your whole life and career, rather than looking at it as, "Oh my gosh, I've never had six months off. I've never taken three months off." I think it's good to come at this looking more from possibilities for yourself and the value of having the break versus the fear-based thinking of "Got to gather nuts." Like a squirrel, "I got to gather nuts. I got to keep gathering nuts. I can't stop gathering nuts, or there won't be enough nuts when winter comes."

If we go back and look at the situation with the surgeon, she said that break saved her life. What is the value of that? And I know that we often have a high threshold for suffering and because there's so much dysfunction in medicine of what people tolerate, that we have a skewed view of really what we should be tolerating and what we really need.

Especially in this country, we're very dysfunctional about the time we take off and time we spend with families. So don't think that what everyone else is doing it's normal. And if you want more time off that you're being indulgent or selfish in any way. We're just workaholics here.

Just to go back a minute to the loss of income. You can also consider doing some side work. Let's say that you are taking a break and you don't have your full-time income, the locum tenens, doing some telemedicine, some clinical work on the side can help keep your income up. You can also do some nonclinical side work, such as consulting, doing chart review, maybe teaching, freelance medical writing. And that could be something you could plan in advance so you had some extra income coming in.



The next potential con is having this gap on your resume. Is a gap on a resume in and of itself a bad thing? Not necessarily, we don't want to have a lot of gaps. And we also want to be able to have a good explanation for what was going on during that time. Thinking ahead, you can do some of these things I've already mentioned that don't take a lot of time that can fill that gap.

For example, you can do telemedicine and there are some companies where you can be an independent contractor, as long as you do I think one case every 90 days, you can still be on their panel. So, you can put on your resume that you're doing telemedicine, but it's not taking a lot of your time. You could be doing freelance medical writing. That could be on there. You could be doing just a little bit of locums, again, filling the gap.

And then another way to deal with the gap in a positive light is to be able to explain it. For example, the physician who took that year off, when she went to have that job interview, she had already prepared an answer when they were going to ask, "What did you do?"

She talked about how she did personal development, and she was reading all these books and she was doing her ballroom dancing and other things, but she also said she devoted her time to professional development. She talked about wanting to increase her knowledge of advances in medicine, and she went to these different conferences and she listed the conferences. No matter what it is that you ended up taking a gap for, there's a way to put a positive spin on it, that's truthful, and it can actually end up being a positive and not a negative.

The last thing I want to mention, that sounds like a con, but it's not really, is having to deal with some of the emotional seaweed of a lifetime that can come up when you are having a break. And the way I see this is that we all have things that happened in the past. We often have gone through different traumas and training, and we haven't been able to process them because we need emotional, physical, mental energy, and space



for our body to heal from these experiences.

When you take a break, you can think, “Ah, it’s going to be so wonderful. Rainbows and unicorns. I have this time. I have less responsibility.” And then you go through what's called the dip where you might find yourself just crying all of a sudden for no reason or lying on the couch and feeling depressed. And this is not a negative, it's actually a healthy thing because you've given yourself some freedom to be able to process these things. This just may be a time when you need to be kinder to yourself. You may need to do some therapy. You may want to talk to a coach.

Whatever it is that you need for resources, just understand that this is normal. I don't want you to be surprised by it because it happens. It happened to me. It happens to my clients. And it's a good thing, because if we're always so busy and we go job to job and we don't really have some time, we can keep carrying these things with us that can even be adversely affecting what's going on in our life right now. That's not a reason to avoid a break. That could be coming along the pike. Just be prepared for it.

All right. I hope this has been helpful. If you're considering a break, I want to strongly encourage you. It was really, really helpful for me. I see it being so helpful for others and you deserve it. As always, it's been great to share this time with you. Don't forget to carpe that diem, and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

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Podcast details

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