

SIGN OF THE TIMES: PART I

THE PERFECTION TRAP: THE ENEMY OF PROGRESS IN MEDICINE

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Lying in the grass with my eyes closed, I felt the sun warm my skin. I tried to slow my racing mind and heart. As a trained surgical resident physician, I knew how to perform a thoracotomy, but, at that moment, I couldn't remember how to breathe.

While I lay in the yard, my mother was three states away being rushed to the hospital with a small bowel obstruction, a complication from her radiation and chemotherapy treatment for squamous cell carcinoma. I was trying to navigate the overwhelming sense of “doing nothing well” and be a perfect surgical resident while simultaneously being a supportive daughter and sister. At the time, I was not proactive in seeking mental health resources for fear of being seen as weak or broken. I believed that as a doctor, I should be able to handle my own stress. Two years later, when I transferred to my internal medicine residency, I had so deeply internalized this belief that I found a place in the hospital where I could cry alone. This belief was not only misguided but also detrimental as I underestimated the importance of mental health. The most important lesson of my journey as a physician began that day, lying on the ground, as I said to myself, “Breathe in and breathe out,” having no idea how to begin to ask for help.

Five years ago, my therapist asked, “Why do you hold your breath when you feel overwhelmed?” I didn't know where to start. We worked together to better understand what was happening, and it was profound to learn that my breathing patterns were a direct manifestation of my emotional state. I discovered that perfectionism distorted my thoughts and created unrealistic expectations.

Perfectionism is often seen as a desirable trait in medicine. The medical field is inherently stressful, and the pressure to perform flawlessly can be overwhelming. Once I began working with my therapist and coach, I discovered my need to be perfect began much earlier than medical school, and that choosing medicine amplified it. After all, the stakes are high, and the margin for error

is slim. However, I learned the hard way that perfectionism can only take you so far. No matter how much I achieved, it never felt like enough.

My feelings of being overwhelmed connected directly with my drive for perfection. As a young doctor, I believed that a “perfect doctor” could handle stress without faltering. To show emotions, like crying or having a panic attack, equated to being broken or not good enough. In my mind, the perfect doctor could take all the punches and still get back up on their own without any help. They would coolly handle every possible scenario, professionally or personally. This unrealistic standard made me strive for toughness and invulnerability that, in turn, exacerbated my stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. It took time and support to understand that being human and showing vulnerability doesn't mean making mistakes; it means embracing the complexities of being a physician.

Prioritizing my mental health was essential not only for my well-being but also for my ability to provide the best care to my patients. Mental health resources are crucial, and seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Early access to counseling, support groups, stress management techniques, and professional coaching can make a significant difference.

In my current role as an Associate Program Director and the Co-Chair for Wellness, I work daily to destigmatize asking for help and increase available mental health resources. One key step was to involve stakeholders from different departments to develop comprehensive wellness programs. We created a support network that includes peer support, access to professional mental health services, workshops on stress management and resilience, and an internal coaching program. These initiatives made mental health resources more accessible and fostered a culture where seeking help is encouraged. My goal is to help others not only remember how to breathe but also to thrive. I found greater satisfaction and joy in my work by focusing on areas of medicine that I was passionate about.

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My residents have even re-named the sessions I lead “Joy with Jobbins.”

You may be thinking, “How can we stop trying to be perfect?” I realized in the early stages of my career, I often compared myself to my colleagues. I saw their successes and failures as a direct reflection of my abilities. This mindset was crippling. It led to constant self-doubt and a distorted view of my achievements. One of the most liberating lessons I learned was that everyone around me is a representative of themselves, not a reflection of me. Their success-

es do not diminish mine and their failures are not my burden to bear. This realization allowed me to focus on my own path and celebrate my achievements without the shadow of comparison. I was letting go of how tightly I held on to the belief that everything needed to be perfect.

Medicine is a demanding field. It is easy to confuse what you think you need to do, rather than what you truly love. For me and many others, perfection was tied to external validation: striving for bigger and better opportunities, pursuing prestige

through competitive fellowships, accolades, or even job promotions. I’m grateful I learned that striving for this level of perfection is an unrealistic goal.

If I could impart one piece of wisdom to my younger self and others starting their careers, it would be this: prioritize your mental health, strive for progress rather than perfection, compare yourself only to your previous self and not to others, focus on what you love, and don’t forget to breathe.

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