Teaching and Learning Moments

Distance, Proximity, and Student Mental Health in the COVID-19 Era

I had many expectations coming into medical school, but none of them included a global pandemic; me going to therapy; or me, in the middle of a pandemic, going to therapy, standing in the middle of a one-person private restroom on campus, balancing my computer—and with it, my therapist—on top of a paper towel dispenser.

Medical education has its surprises, I suppose.

To begin at the beginning: At some point in the early-to-middle months of my first year of medical school, I picked up a nagging doubt which, stoked by reluctance to speak about it, burst into intractable anxiety.

It was the same old thing—impostor syndrome—or perhaps not, because whose emotions can fit into such neat terms?

“Am I a fraud?” I thought to myself. “Do I deserve to be here?”

I had never (or very rarely) experienced these anxieties before, but now they consumed the vast majority of my waking moments. I would wake with a worry in mind and carry it through class, through lunch, through and through and through.

Fast forward to July 2020. I had been living with others on a separate part of campus away from the medical school during the pandemic. When I returned to the medical dorms, I began working in my room alone, seeing few people throughout the day, most of them strangers or familiar security guards. My thought patterns reached a fever pitch, and, by the beginning of my next course, I was spending vast quantities of time overcome with worry. I could not think straight. I felt fragile, useless, and silly.

After numerous calls with a physician mentor of mine, I reached out to a therapist; hence the restroom Zoom consult.

I was on the medical campus that day, but the conference rooms were closed because of the pandemic, and for some odd reason—who could imagine?—I thought it unflattering for them to see that I was calling from the restroom. So I projected a photo of the Victory Gardens near Fenway Park in Boston onto my background. And then it hit me.

Standing there, looking at where I was and where I appeared to be, I realized that my friends, my future colleagues, whom I saw primarily on Zoom, were blind to what was happening in my life. And it was, therefore, impossible for them to help.

A question: In the COVID-19 era, deprived of proximity, how much of my peers’ suffering will go unseen, or has already gone unseen, covered by virtual icons, muted as easily as the click of a button? And after the pandemic resolves, how will we take the lessons learned from our struggles, our distances, back into a socially proximal world?

Supposing that I am not the only medical student wrestling with these issues, I implore others who are to seek comfort in their peers, whose capacities for healing are remarkable. I, for one, began sharing my anxieties with close friends on a more regular basis, in-person and over calls, receiving their proactive insights before any emotional tumult seized its chance to fester. And it was therapeutic.

And I implore those peers to be proactive, vigilant of their classmates’ joys and struggles alike, which is perhaps the best preparation for nurturing that same awareness with patients.

Because medical training, and life itself, is stressful, and in moments like these—moments in which it is all too easy to suffer and worry alone—it is crucial that we recognize the comfort needed, and offered, by those around us.

Despite the distance, it is closer than we might expect.

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References


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