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The Differential

Being Brave in Medical School

stephanie.tardieu, Ob/Gyn & Women's Health, 11:46PM Feb 1, 2015

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What's been interesting about fourth year so far is how similar and dissimilar it's been to third year. At first, one wonders why any distinction is needed between the third and fourth year. Technically, we are doing some of the same rotations and working in the same clinical settings with the same teams. But I think the real difference between the two is in the responsibility you acquire.

As a fourth year, you are expected to fulfill almost all the duties of an intern and act as the front-line provider and advocate for your patients. You have to know their histories, lab data, and imaging; think of treatment plans; place their orders; talk to their families; and work with nurses and other specialties to execute these plans in order to hopefully restore them back to health before their discharge.

At times, this can seem overwhelming, especially when you are caring for multiple sick patients with multiple problems. You have to juggle doing as much as you can with knowing when to ask for help and admitting when you may be in over your head. This is not always easy, since as medical students, we do not admit to difficulties or weakness easily. We want to prove our worth and show that we are always capable, ready, and willing. At least, this is how I have felt throughout my time in medical school. I have always had trouble knowing how and when to express when I struggle and often felt that I was the only one experiencing difficulty. In these instances, my solution has typically been to put on a strong face, push forward, and to "fake it until I made it" (so to speak).

But on my medicine subinternship, I watched a classmate struggling to integrate with her new team and her patient load be brought to tears by how overwhelmed she felt. She is an excellent medical student who is highly motivated, and I know she will make an amazing doctor. However, in this moment, I realized that no matter how good we are, we all struggle sometimes, whether silently or openly.

All of us put on our brave faces each time we step out onto the wards or into our classrooms. We want to be the best doctor; we want to heal people and to be the best of who we can be. But talking with my classmate about what she was experiencing, it occurred to me that she was braver than she perhaps realized in her moment of struggle.

I think it takes a great deal of courage to be open and honest about what you are really feeling to a colleague, especially in a highly competitive field like medicine. And indirectly, her honesty about what she was feeling normalized some of the stress that I had been feeling. It helped me to realize that my struggle is not unique; that we are all in this together and that we have to support each other through these sometimes difficult moments during training in order to get through it.

In August of 2014, two medicine interns committed suicide in NYC; one an intern at Columbia, the other at Cornell. Very little information was reported about these cases, which were presumably unrelated. We know that both had matched at two of the most competitive programs in the country, and one was a confirmed AOA member. But who were these young doctors really, and what led them to this point of no return? Did they suffer silently through depression, anxiety, or simply through the everyday challenges that come with becoming a physician? Did they feel isolated in their professional setting and unable to express whatever was causing them distress? The answers to these questions, we may never know.

But I would encourage us all to display the kind of courage that my classmate displayed; to be brave enough to say when we are struggling every once in a while. Hopefully, in time, this could help reduce some of the intense pressure we feel as medical students and eventually create an environment where people feel comfortable admitting when they are having a hard time and asking for help.

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