

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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Rebuilding More of Me

The only car left in the parking lot. Again. A shiny, blue vessel adrift in a sea of black asphalt and bright halogen lights. I sigh, knowing this means that I still have not mastered how to get my notes done efficiently. That I have missed dinner and bath time and bedtime with my kids, that although I really would like to find the time and energy to reconnect with my wife, I will likely have neither. I know what I need to do, but I can't. I just...can't. I can't do what I want to do. I can't even do what I need to do. Even worse, I am mean. I am curt with my wife when she tries to help. I yell at my kids. Even with my patients, the last bastion where I've been able to mete out compassion and concern, I find myself adrift. I am failing. As a husband. As a father. As a doctor.

I have been here before. Once in college, after an onslaught of medical school rejection letters seemed like it would never end. Another time during residency, when I struggled to grasp how to help others when the foundation of my family life was in shambles. Each time, the pattern was achingly familiar. The loss of joy. Withdrawal from the very people who cared for me most. Late nights spent aimlessly wandering the corners of my mind. Work usually held up against the collapse. I always saved the last bit in the tank for work. But when even that was gone, I knew I had to do something.

But here and there, I let others in. There is a sense of relief that comes with letting go of holding it all in. Family and friends are supportive. Colleagues are understanding, some even a bit curious.

More importantly, the people I loved most in the world told me I *had* to do something. And yet I stalled. I resisted. I thrashed against commonsense and goodwill and love and tears and anguish. *What would people say? What would they think?* An anchor from unknown depths kept me tethered, circling the same dark thoughts—I can't...They won't...Nothing will...

But the constant circling left me exhausted and numb. There came a point when there was nothing left to resist. And then ... I passed through some invisible barrier. Shame transformed from an angry red to a muted gray. The storm that had raged and wailed let up for just a moment. A moment to look about me and survey the damage. Future aspirations, dangerously imperiled. Fragile relationships, injured and scarred. And a fractured outlook that, if not mended, would leave me adrift seemingly forever.

And so...I held out a hand, asking for help and support. The act of reaching out was surprisingly not

as terrifying as I'd imagined. Friends lent a sympathetic ear. Colleagues accommodated as best they could. In college, a kind therapist, still a trainee, helped me extract my feelings onto an emotional workspace, where I could identify them, see the misconceptions and truths underlying them, and find a way to fight back. During residency, a more experienced therapist helped me to piece together a puzzling part of my past, to understand how this was hampering my clinical work and to find ways to more productively use it to my advantage. And each time, with commitment to the process, with time and effort, I was able to get back on track. To heal important relationships. To mend and find new perspectives that allowed for joy and hope, albeit different versions, to flourish again.

And yet, here I am. Again. I can acknowledge that this has been an extremely stressful period. I now have 2 young children. I am an attending physician, with all the responsibilities and challenges that entails. I have developed and launched a new clinical program that is increasingly in demand but still on shaky ground. My wife again, gently but firmly, points out my struggles and their connections to my past. I pass through the barrier more easily this time, aware and at peace with taking action.

Not later, but now. But how to do it? I am an attending physician in the field from which I need support. Many of the best clinicians and treatment settings are not options. I know them too well. So I ask around discreetly. Mentors and loved ones offer suggestions. After a little exploration, I find someone about whom I have heard good things but whom I do not know directly. I worry about seeing my patients in a waiting area, but he is

able to see me in a way that minimizes the chances of running into them. I agonize over whether or not to use my health insurance, and finally choose not to. I feel uncomfortable about this relatively unusual expenditure on myself, but ultimately recognize this is an investment in my future. And so, we begin.

At first, we work to understand each other. He gives off a kind and engaging vibe. His attention to my concerns about confidentiality eases some of my anxiety about seeking treatment. His willingness to acknowledge that clinical work is stressful and can become toxic establishes a life raft upon which I can hoist myself, build new strategies, and shape a different perspective. For my part, I work hard to set shame and filters aside. I try to be honest with him, but even more so with myself. I (re)discover that I am very adept at compartmentalization. It is convenient to place this habit of locking away difficult experiences and emotions at the feet of my medical training and a busy clinical life. But there is more

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to it than that. In response to intense emotions, past and present, I have found ways to suppress them, to bury them deep with the intent of forgetting about them. But we explore how this pattern, while perhaps somewhat adaptive in past difficult situations, now causes these intense emotions to bubble up in unpredictable ways. Anger. Unrelenting worry. Sadness. The loss of joy.

We craft a plan. I brush the dust off some mindfulness skills and work again to sit with my emotions. To purposefully examine what I am feeling, allow it to be with me for a time, then process it, and move forward. I learn again how to engage my mind in some healthy checks and balances. I learn to quiet the internal thoughts telling me that any time spent on previously enjoyable activities is undeserved and inefficient and I purposefully rededicate time and energy to some old woodworking projects. I build things. Out of wood. With my bare hands. Benches and boxes, and with them, a shored up vessel within which I can again stand. And then...move forward.

First, I work to repair relationships. I cannot stand to continually apologize, so instead I hunt, sniffing like a bloodhound for the merest whiff of enjoyment. I can't stand vegging out in front of Netflix. But I do enjoy connecting with my wife on the one show we both actually like. I get tired of reading the same old children's stories to my girls night after night. But as we move on to chapter books, Greek mythology, and finally Harry Potter, I begin looking forward to putting on dramatic scenes and voices. I set aside my pangs of guilt for not having reached out on a friend's birthday and call anyway. To check in. To ask. To connect.

Work remains...work. There is no lightning flash, no ingenious solutions to feeling a poor fit for a system that seems to emphasize efficiency and productivity over human connection. But I realign the chip on my shoulder and ask how I can derive more fulfillment out of each day. Some days it is to *show them*, to fight the system. On others, it is for my patients. And occasionally, it's just for me.

I work harder to savor every joyful morsel of clinical contact, now better understanding how essential this is to my vitality as a physician. While acknowledging the privilege, I work to shape the contours of my clinical career closer to my strengths. I transition toward clinical consultation. I teach more. I talk more with peers about cases, projects, frustrations, joys.

I struggle with what to say to others about this journey. The old thoughts linger. *What will they say? What will they think?* But here and there, I let others in. There is a sense of relief that comes with letting go of holding it all in. Family and friends are supportive. Colleagues are understanding, some even a bit curious. Occasionally, I come across someone who has been on a similar journey, and we connect on a deeper level to share experiences and strategies. One day, within the context of a broader conversation on self-care, I share my experience with my trainees. I sense a subtle shift in the way some of them approach me. A bit more willing to discuss challenges and vulnerabilities. More open to reflection and self-improvement. A few clinicians even ask for help in finding therapists for themselves, allowing me to transform my process of seeking help into a way to help others.

Things begin to coalesce. I feel more settled. I am kinder to myself. Less prone to anger, inwardly or outwardly directed. The storm has long passed. My ship is stronger. I have built more than benches and boxes and things. I have built more of me. New additions that can help me weather the next storm.

We meet one last time to finish up. He kindly reviews our progress together. I try to crystallize what I have learned—what I will take with me as I move forward. He reminds me that he remains available should I need support again. I will be more able to make this call, to reach out my hand, when the next storm comes. As I step outside after this last session, I look for my car. The last one in the lot. I open the door, climb inside, and drive on.

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