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BEWARE OF THE “J” WORD

Joseph Brown, MD

Ultrasound Fellow, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California and Residency in Emergency Medicine, University of California, San Diego, San Diego, California

Reprint Address: Joseph Brown, MD, University of California, San Francisco, 510 Utah St., San Francisco, CA 94110

I had just finished my Chief Resident Grand Rounds. The floor was open for questions, but no one said anything. I awkwardly thumbed the slide advancer, then took a seat as everyone packed up their things and left in silence. The focus of my talk had been lessons my (now) wife and I learned during our 4 years of a long-distance relationship during my emergency medicine residency. I have since realized, however, that those lessons can serve as the foundation for something that has become very popular these days: “wellness.”

A lot is being said about wellness, but the hardest part about it is that there is no magic pill or one-time fix. It is something that we will all struggle with and rarely, if ever, find the elusive knife’s edge that affords us a “perfect balance” in life. Instead of trying to find that single solution, I would assert that we need to focus on strategies for success that allow us to quickly redirect when we find ourselves off-center.

So much of the problem is that we are hard-wired from a young age to just keep our heads down long enough to complete _____ (insert next life event coming up). It starts in college when we *just* need to get through finals, Organic Chemistry, or the MCAT. Then in medical school it’s histology (if they’re still doing it these days?), Step 1, Step 2, our Surgery rotation, EM Sub-I’s, away rotations, or the match. Once we’ve made it to residency, it is blocks of nights, off-service Trauma and MICU rotations, and applying for a job. Next thing we know, it is wedding planning, a baby finally sleeping through the

night, getting an infant to primary school, or a teenager off to college. The problem with grinding for “*just* a few more (days/weeks/months/years)” is that when you finally look up, you can go from being a bright-eyed 18-year-old to an attending in the middle of your career in your 40s and you have “*just* a few more days”-awayed decades.

What I would like to propose are three strategies for combating this dilemma. They are three relatively simple points: actually make priorities, win the calendar, and be vulnerable. My wife and I found that by focusing on these three things, we were able to transition from *just* surviving the 4 years of long-distance into 4 years in which we were able to grow individually, professionally, and in our relationship together.

First, actually make priorities. It’s a pedestrian statement but it functions as the foundation for everything. Without making explicit priorities in our lives, we wind up being very reactionary in our decision-making, as opposed to being pro-active and directed. My wife and I found that an annual camping trip allowed us protected time away from the helter-skelter of life and a focused time for making “resolutions” to each other. While camping, we would make a goal for ourselves personally, professionally, and as a couple. If you’re struggling with a framework in which to come up with these, Caleb Gardner’s “Personal Impact Canvas” is a nice structure within which to work (1). When making these priorities, it is very important actually to commit them to paper and have some interval in which you’re looping back to

hold yourself accountable. Our resolutions were sometimes as mundane as not repeating a date night for a year, or as complex as getting a research project off the ground and moving forward.

Second, win the calendar. Once you know what your priorities are, you can move into being pro-active with your calendar. Start annually: are there any large trips, weddings, or other personal events that will drive your whole year? Once you have these jotted down, move into the monthly schedule. Too often we make the mistake of not prioritizing ourselves. I’m not recommending placing so many requests that you become a burden on the rest of your group, but make sure to actually try and win your calendar. EM:RAP (Emergency Medicine: Reviews and Perspectives) published a podcast in August 2016 featuring Dike Drummond on planning your calendar, that was called “The Schedule Hack” (2). Too often we schedule in work, meetings, back-up shifts, kids’ events, but we don’t prioritize ourselves. Most importantly, everyone should consider what Dike Drummond called a “bucket list” item for you and make sure to schedule that. It’s the one thing that if you do weekly or monthly will allow you to be a happier person. Prioritize that thing; whether it’s a golden weekend, book club, a concert/play, exercise group, or time to walk the dog with your spouse. Make your priorities and actually follow through to win the calendar.

Finally, be vulnerable. Personal happiness is something that is both relationship and professionally focused. Our career is centered around our being stoic and the rocks in the storm during some of our patients’ most vulnerable moments; yet many of us pride ourselves on never showing our own vulnerability. The emotional plaque of our training inevitably needs to be dealt with, or we will find ourselves being curt with our spouses, kids, family, or friends. To do this effectively, I would challenge you to do several things. Start by finding a place to be vulnerable; ours was in the woods away from cell phones and distractions. Secondly, schedule time to think about

what happened during your shift. Personally, I take 5 quick minutes immediately after a shift when I get in my car and think about everything that happened while I was at work. I found that doing this re-energized me before returning the next day. Time for reflection can be immediately after your shift, at home, on a scheduled run, or in a yoga session. It does not matter where; but take the time to actually process your daily work. Thirdly, find an appropriate medium through which to reflect. Options for this include writing letters or journaling, using art, or playing music. Whatever allows you to access your place of vulnerability. Finally, find the right person through which to process everything. Consider seeing a therapist before you need one. Consider colleagues who know about the burdens of our daily careers. The person to help you should not be your spouse or family, however, due to the heaviness of our daily job. Ultimately, however, by finding healthy ways to process what we do daily, we can find a way to change from *just* surviving another shift to actually maintaining our daily happiness.

In the end, there is no magic bullet or pill to solve the day-to-day challenges. One of the most important starting points, however, is to realize that we need to utilize strategies (daily, weekly, monthly) to optimize our chances for happiness and wellness. By repetitively applying these, hopefully we can find that we transition from *just* surviving our shifts and daily routines to growing and thriving. Three starting points I have found over these past 4 years include actually making priorities, winning the calendar, and being vulnerable. I hope that they can function as starting places for you as well.

REFERENCES

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