

Take Two Poems and Call Me in the Morning: Poetic Remedies to Soothe Physician Stress and Burn-out

- I. Focus on poetry as an antidote for stress and burn-out**
 - A. I know not everyone loves poetry**
 - B. New Yorker cartoon: A desperate man and his partners, wielding semi-automatic weapons, burst into a bank. Gazing about at the panic-stricken customers, he shouts, “Everyone stay still, and no one will get hurt. All I want to do is read you some of my poetry.”**
 - C. I hope no one will feel hostage at the end of this presentation, and that you will all have discovered or recovered an appreciation for poetry’s capacity to renew and replenish our spirits**

At first glance one might think that medicine and poetry are diametrically opposed. It might be useful for us to reflect on two questions linking poetry and medicine. The first is

- II. What Are Similarities Between Physicians and Poets?**
 - A. Confront mortality and death**
 - B. Create order from chaos**
 - C. Pursue relief from suffering**
 - D. Concern with healing**
 - E. Combine steadiness with tenderness**

The other question is:

- III. How Is a Patient Like a Poem?**
 - A. Should make us feel something, as well as cognitively apprehend**
 - B. Are sometimes allusive, indirect, mysterious rather than straightforward and accessible**
 - C. Pack complexity and multiple meanings into a small space**
 - D. Require careful, empathic attention to truly understand**

- IV. Physician Stress and Burn-Out**
 - A. At some point in our careers, we need to pause, reflect, take stock of our lives**
 - B. What used to invigorate may have become routine and uninteresting**
 - C. Our work, and perhaps our lives as well, lose luster and meaning**
 - D. Definition of burn-out – of course we all know what burn-out is because many of us have experienced it, or at least seen it in colleagues and friends**
 - E. Dante Alighieri quote**

- V. How Can Poetry Help?**
 - A. Many strategies to address burn-out**
 - B. Poetry can’t cure cancer; solve billing problems; take care of your paperwork; fix the ills of the current healthcare system**
 - C. Poetry can –**

1. Help us reflect on our lives and work
2. Help us change the way we see things, the way we understand things
3. Help us transcend the suffering of our patients and ourselves
4. May help us heal

VI. Benefits of Poetry

- A. It's short – haiku by Basho
- B. Its reliance on metaphor and imagery encourages us to cultivate our own creative imaginations
- C. Its ambiguity encourages multiple interpretations, multiple ways of understanding so that we
 1. rekindle our curiosity about people, things, and the world around us
 2. remember how to feel genuine empathy for other voices and other perspectives
- D. Concerns itself with questions of suffering and meaning
- E. Develops emotional connection to others and ourselves
- F. Can lead to a renewal of awe and wonder with the practice of medicine, and with life itself

VII. A Good Poem

- A. Can help us see familiar experiences in new ways
- B. Walking the Dog
 1. Here we have a painfully familiar, common scenario: obese, noncompliant, diabetic patient
 2. What does this doctor do? He *thinks* for five minutes about his patient; he comes up with an out-of-the-box solution
 3. What I especially like about this poem is that the solution doesn't work, at least not in the way that the doctor intended
 4. Despite his "lack of success," the physician is not annoyed or blaming, but full of affection for this woman, and open to seeing the secondary gain that did come from the intervention
- C. Can help us reflect on difficult patients in new ways
- D. The Blue Knitted Glove
 1. In this poem, a physician struggles with his feelings of helplessness and anger at his inability to resolve the chronic pain of a patient with severe arthritis
 2. Embodying the pain as Coyote, the Trickster, he wants to strangle it
 3. But he realizes that, in the end, what he can give the patient is simply his presence; he can help her best by listening to her story
- E. Can help us remember why medicine is still a calling, not just a career
- F. Night On Call
 1. Here, an exhausted physician enumerates some of the joys of doctoring
 2. The miracle and privilege of her work somehow penetrates through the fog of exhaustion and sense of being overwhelmed
 2. Sadly, it is all too rare to hear this kind of heartfelt gratitude expressed in the typical doctors' hospital lounge, but it's really important to hear it

- G Allows us to face our vulnerabilities and limitations**
- H. Gives us the courage to continue to care for patients**
- I. Helps us find the grace to forgive ourselves**

J. I Stepped Past Your Room Today

- 1. Here, the physician first notices and admits his reluctance to enter the room of his dying patient**
- 2. He also evaluates it as “not good,” so he knows something needs to change**
- 3. Instead of “forcing” himself to the patient’s bedside, he reminds himself of the patient’s story; not only his medical story but his human story**
- 4. In an interesting role reversal, he reflects on the patient’s courage contrasted with his own fear and impotence**
- 5. Ultimately, he recognizes that if he can “hold the patient clearly enough” (what do you think this phrase means?), he will lose his fear, with the implication that he can then be present for this patient**

VIII. Writing Poetry

- A. Long tradition of physician-poets**
- B. Personal satisfaction and perhaps healing**

IX. Summary: Poetic Remedies Can

- A. Cause us to reflect on our lives**
- B. Reinvigorate daily activities that have become dull and oppressive**
- C. Provide patience and insight into situations and people who frustrate and exasperate**
- D. Remind us of the joy and meaning found in the practice of medicine**
- E. Allow us to forgive ourselves and seek forgiveness**
- F. In all these ways, poetry can help us connect to the heart, and art, of doctoring**