

## COMMENTS AoD ASSIGNMENT #3 2007

---

--, thank you so much with entrusting me with this personal story. I am very sorry for the loss of your mom at such a young age. That's just so hard. Of course you are going to resonate emotionally, perhaps very strongly, to situations that so closely parallel what you went through as a child. That is so natural and normal. You know this circumstance not as a physician, but from the inside-out, as a daughter. That makes it really hard to go into the patient's room; to interact with the patient; and to say goodbye.

And then the question becomes, which I hear is one of the questions you're asking, what do we do with all this? One thing I would wonder about is, is there still some mourning or grieving to do for the loss of your own mom? Even though she died a long time ago, it's tough for a little kid to lose her mother, and maybe there's some completion stuff that you need to do – or do again. Maybe seeing this mother of two young children makes you want to reconnect for a little with your own feelings of loss, and gratitude, and anger, and love. I don't know what the feelings are, but they are probably there. Maybe this is a time to write (or rewrite) your mom that letter, telling her these feelings, telling her how much you miss her; or visiting her grave; or talking to someone close to you who knew her. I don't think we ever close the door on these losses; every once in awhile we need to revisit them; and in this sense perhaps this patient offered you not only the opportunity to experience loss, but to remember your mom.

So maybe after remembering your mom, recontacting the feelings, acknowledging and regrieving her death, you might ask yourself, is there any way these difficult feelings of too much connection can be softened somehow so that they can help your patient. Maybe not now, maybe not this patient. But it might be possible at some point to place your very tender, painful feelings in the service of this woman. There are probably very few people who can really touch the devastating grief she must be feeling at needing to leave her children. Maybe within all of this suffering, hers and yours, there is something you are uniquely able to give her. Maybe this has something to do with saying how sad you were when your own mother died; how hard it was for you; how much you still miss her; but also how people did rally round you; and how you have been able to make a good and happy life. I don't mean to be putting words in your mouth; this is just an imagined example. Only you would be able to figure out, in conjunction with deep listening to this patient, what she might need and you might have to give.

You might want to ask yourself, why do I want to cry in this patient's presence? Why am I avoiding her? What is making my own pain so overwhelming? The feelings are the right place to start.

You might also decide that right now you are too close to this woman's tragic circumstances to be fully present with her. That is also an entirely valid position. I would only encourage you to regard that as a starting, rather than an ending point. The more emotionally "steady" you can be with your mom's passing (which in no way means not

grieving, or not missing her), the more you can learn from this fundamental aspect of life in a way that can help heal future patients who are facing death.

I really commend you for noticing what was happening and for sharing this incident.  
Best, Dr. Shapiro