

COMMENTS AoD ASSIGNMENT #2 FEB 6, 2007

Hi --. I really liked what you said about finding an escape or “refuge” whether in exercise, music, or the woes of a sports team (:)). You’re so right that most problems and stressors appear much more solvable with a little perspective. I also appreciated the confidence you expressed that we are usually in a place for a reason; even though it might feel like we’ve been given more than we can handle, usually we can rise to the occasion, for sure imperfectly, as you point out, but we do rise! Thank you for your reflections, --. All the best, Dr. Shapiro

--, you’d be surprised (or maybe you wouldn’t) how (especially for men) it is that one primary relationship that stands between them and a less healthy disconnection from the world. You are very lucky to have your girlfriend. And personally, I think two-hour dinners are very therapeutic (as well as very European!). It takes some time to shift gears – and perspectives. Did you ever read Milos Kundera’s book (or see the movie) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*? I believe in your last sentence you and he are talking about something similar. Life is sometimes (often?) “unbearable.” Yet sometimes, through love, through friendship, through grace, it can become “lighter.” Thanks for sharing your thoughts. Dr. Shapiro

--, thank you for this assignment. It’s not necessary to turn in the personal burn-out assessments; they are only for your interest and self-awareness. I like all your ideas for self-care. Being heard, being *recognized* by others, even if they can’t do anything, can really be validating and stress-reducing. And I can just imagine you bouncing around your apartment with your karaoke mike, wailing away. That’s energizing, physical, and just plain fun. Finally, yoga and meditation are calming, centering ways of releasing tension. If you can figure out ways of continuing to share with friends, sing your heart out, be silly and fun, and take care of your spiritual core I guarantee you next year will be a good one. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, you sound in a very good place, which makes me happy. I also adore your dry sense of humor (as in going *down* the stairs on a regular basis). Further, I really like the way you’ve identified different spheres in life – emotional, physical, and spiritual. Funnily enough, this is exactly how I think about self-care (with intellectual thrown in as well, but as an aspiring urologist, that’s probably not something you have to worry about). Sometimes we overlook the fact that taking care of ourselves is a multifaceted endeavor, and we need to try to attend to all aspects of ourselves. On the other hand, self-care should certainly not become just one more area o=to pursue perfectionism. We can

always do better at everything. We can also realize that sometimes, good enough is just fine and kick back and – yes, I admit it – watch tv. Thanks --. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, I agree with you that awareness is a big part of prevention; or at least minimizing effects of stress. You sound like you have the bases covered – and interestingly, those are the categories I find helpful for self-care too. I try to do one thing every day to help heal myself emotionally, physically, and spiritually – and if I can do more, all the better. It also sounds like you have a lot of wonderful resources to draw on, starting with your wife. It's great you have others to turn to as well. Also, finding ways to pay attention to physical and spiritual wellbeing matters a great deal. It's not necessarily the amount of time (although it helps to have some reasonable time to devote to these aspects of self), but more the intention not to completely lose sight of these things. I am confident you won't. Thanks for sharing. Dr. Shapiro

--, you share many good ideas. I know for some couples it works very well to have a “fire-wall” between work and family (including one of my daughters and her husband). Keeping work and home separate can be a good reminder that work is not the totality of life. I respect your habit of personal prayer, which is a way of anchoring ourselves in a much broader context than work; and reminding ourselves we sometimes need to ask for help from a Source beyond ourselves. I also really liked the idea of a personal inventory – I've heard of this from a couple of other students over the years, and I wish you'd shared it in class. I think it's a wonderful concept to take stock of oneself on a regular basis, honestly but not punitively, to be aware of your strengths and flaws, and how you can try to be a better person. I strongly encourage the journal-writing. Even if it's just a few lines a month, it will stimulate self-awareness, and provide you an invaluable record of a very important time in your life. Finally, it seems perfectly normal to me to want to get away from patients sometimes. So it's not about chastising yourself for that feeling, but trying to understand what it's telling you about your situation (need a little break, need to do something fun, need to say another prayer). Then I think it helps to look for things to be grateful for – one patient said thanks, another didn't throw his bedpan this time, whatever. Sometimes gratitude takes effort, but we can usually find things to remind us that in so many ways we *are* lucky. Well, I think I ended up writing more than you did, but you clearly stimulated a lot of thoughts in me. --, you have the gift of pith... for which you should feel – grateful! Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, I have great respect for how you describe you “walk with God” as what is really at the center of your life. I try to live that way myself, but I must admit I don't always (maybe that should read “rarely”) succeed. In any case, although I would never minimize the hard work that is involved in walking that walk, I think it is something to be truly grateful for because of its ability to fill all aspects of your life with meaning. It is

obvious that you are committed to the “balanced” life, something just as obviously Dr. X and I also believe brings happiness and fulfillment (at least to us). You say it even better – you are in pursuit of a whole life. That is a beautiful image. And I agree that medicine, no matter how noble and fulfilling, can rarely allow you to express all of who you are. However, I do think that the more you can bring your wonderful, unique self into medicine the happier you will be a better – and more whole – physician. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Yes, --, I agree with you, you’re in a profession that is emotionally and physically demanding, and it’s hard to keep it all together. But you’re really on the right track, as far as I’m concerned. Family and friends are vital, and should not be sacrificed for the pressures of work, although it’s not easy to honor them all. However, as you observe, it doesn’t always take a lot of time (although it would be very nice to have a lot of time) to keep up with the really important people in your life; it is more making the effort when you’re feeling like you have no more effort left and all you want to do is sleep! (Btw, sometimes I think the best choice you can make is go to bed (-:)). So it’s all about “balance” – and yum yum, cooking! Best, Dr. Shapiro

Thanks -- for sharing all these lovely coping strategies. Now I can imagine you dancing about your house or singing gospel while swinging in your hammock. Those are such joyful images they even make me feel happier :-). I also respect what you are saying about leaving toxic relationships. There is a great Buddhist saying that goes, “There is a lot to learn even from our enemies. But when we have learned everything we can, it is time to say goodbye to these people.” I very much like the personal “check-in” too. That is really neat – an excellent way of keeping on top of those difficult emotions that without attention can build up. Good for you on all fronts. Keep dancing and singing – they’ll help you get through residency. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, your essay shows a lot of personal awareness, which is great. You know your strengths and vulnerabilities, and have made some really good decisions for next year. Personally, I find commuting exhausting, and a decade ago was able to shift most of my work to campus, which is a lot closer to my home. It made a big difference in my emotional well-being! You sound like you have some really good insights into why EM is a good specialty choice for you, and how you’ve come to terms with some of its limitations in terms of “fixing” vs. “doing the best you can.” Actually, I find that to be a very wise distinction, applicable to almost all specialties, and I believe if more physicians followed it they would have more peace. Your APGAR score (which we know is what really counts (-:)) indicates you are quite healthy and at low risk for burn-out. It may slip a little next year; but with your level of self-awareness I’m confident you will do an excellent job of surviving both internship and residency. Best, Dr. Shapiro

I really liked your essay. It was thoughtful and showed a lot of self-knowledge. Believe me, planning a wedding is definitely a full-time job! When one of my daughters got married, she didn't have time to do the planning, so she delegated it to me. But I am really terrible at things like that, and didn't have enough time either, so I delegated it to a wedding planner. We were all a lot less stressed and because we were more focused on the vows than the table cloths it turned out great. So congratulations on your upcoming nuptials, and my advice – don't worry about the small things.

I can also relate to your penchant for self-criticism. Like you, I had a highly critical person in my life. You've probably noticed that a lot of high achievers are also very self-critical – and this can make them very critical of others as well. I think secretly we are a little afraid that if we let go of the critical voice we've internalized, we won't push ourselves so hard. It's taken me many years to shake that voice (and I still hear it on occasion), so I agree with you that it doesn't happen overnight. For me, it was a matter of wondering if I could be my best self with another approach based more on respecting and trusting my abilities and instincts. It's worked out pretty well, and I hope you can find your own way toward releasing that chastising self – which isn't the same as reflecting on who we are and how we can get a bit closer to the person we want to be, but hopefully through self-love, not self-hate.

I also have to say that alone time can be a very important way of self-replenishment and self-nourishment. Frankly, I don't consider it as selfish at all, any more than it is selfish to eat or sleep or exercise. We all need ways of recharging our batteries. Some people's church is a building with a cross on it; for some people, it's the forest or the sea; for some, it's curling up in a comfortable chair and taking a little time to just be, rather than always doing.

I hope your exercise plan works out. It sounds like you've analyzed the barriers, and have come up with some good strategies to overcome them. Overall, you sound like you are going to be in very good shape – on all levels – next year. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, you did a really thorough job with this assignment. I appreciate how carefully you paid attention to the burn-out scales. You seemed to take them seriously, and used them to understand more deeply your areas of strength and vulnerability. I was impressed with your honesty in assessing yourself – you are open and clear-sighted. You sound very fulfilled and unconflicted with your choice of medicine as a profession; in fact, that sounds like your greatest source of satisfaction.

Of course, you are quite right that most of us need a clone to do all the things and live in the way we'd ideally like. Trying for a "perfect score" on the burn-out scales I think would make me burn-out on the spot (-). I prefer to use them as triggers for thinking

about any particular areas I'm really in trouble; or where I'd like to devote more attention. The scales aren't meant to overwhelm, just raise questions.

And I understand a little when you write that the personal stuff can be much more overwhelming than the professional. At least at work there are protocols, teams, PDRs, lab results, things and people to help guide us. Sometimes we can feel very alone in our personal lives. And when we can't figure out what we're feeling we can end up cut off from a very important part of ourselves.

-- thank you once again for being so forthcoming. If you'd ever like to pursue any of these topics, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me or Dr. X. In the meantime, take care of yourself... one step at a time. Best, Dr. Shapiro

You know, --, it's interesting how so many people think of a spouse and children as a distraction or impediment from school. But I'm with you – I see them as an incredible source of support, and also perspective.

I thought your observation about stress was very perceptive. Communication takes work and when you're exhausted emotionally and physically it's hard to be a good communicator. Yet the result is that you become isolated from the very people you need to help you get through the extra stress. It can be a vicious cycle, that's for sure. But you see it clearly, and that can help you be prepared and think about other ways of approaching situations of high stress, especially when they are predictable ones.

It sounds like you have many ways to keep balanced and grounded in your life, from Bible study as an anchor to your faith and biking, surfing, and running as ways to keep your physical well-being while also giving you much-needed time for reflection). All the pieces are there – just remember to make a commitment to reach deep for a little extra love for your wife when you feel least able to give it. From experience, I know it's there. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, it sounds as though you do nurturing things for yourself, such as hanging out with friends and playing basketball; but you need to check in with yourself occasionally to make sure this area of your life does not become neglected. I like your plan of sharing a little bit more with family and friends about what your work life is like on a daily basis. This is not only sharing about your work, it is sharing about yourself. And from what we know about the literature on PTSD (not that medical school is a traumatic event – well, not *just* a traumatic event ☺), although reliving stressful experiences can be difficult, *not* reliving them can be even more difficult down the road. Remember too, you are in control of the narrative – you can share as much or as little as you like. But increasing your disclosures even slightly will both unburden you and make the people close to you feel that they are more part of your life. Don't be surprised if it feels a little awkward at

first – any new way of acting is always awkward. You’ll get used to it, and even come to enjoy it! Best, Dr. Shapiro

Very interesting observations, --. From the perspective of almost 60 years, I’d say spirituality is something to be open to, but not forced. My spiritual life is quite central to my life now, but I didn’t even have any spiritual inclinations until I was 28. Then I underwent another spiritual permutation when my last kid was born. So be aware, but not worried 😊.

What you say about the intertwining of emotional and physical I think couldn’t be more true. It really is all connected, no matter how much western medicine would like to parse it out. It’s a “balance” – we are not built only to do and do; occasionally we have to rest and receive. Invigorating the body is a good way of settling the mind and vice-versa. Self-care is a critical part of taking care of others. Thank you for your reflections. Dr. Shapiro

Hi --. You seem to have an excellent handle on this issue already – that’s great! If you’ve been able to maintain activities for your physical health and family contact for your social health in medical school, you won’t lose those things in residency. You have already established patterns that honor both the body and your interconnectedness with others; and you’ve already experienced the benefits.

In terms of emotional transparency, I know we put forward a somewhat difference message than the dominant one in medical school. We believe that conventional wisdom on this point is misguided – physicians become so afraid of experiencing emotions in relationship to patient care that they turn themselves into automatons. In the long run, this is harder to deal with than becoming comfortable even with negative emotions such as helplessness, anger, and sorrow. We hope we have given you some ideas about how to go about feeling things without being overwhelmed by the feelings. I like your plan – and remember, you don’t have to do a triple somersault off the high diving board on this one. Just dip your toe in the water and experiment with how to get the right balance for you between emotional engagement and emotional detachment.

Thanks for your thoughtful essay. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, I think you’ve got the point exactly. A lot of people say, “But it’s so selfish of me to get enough sleep; or take a 20 minute break for lunch; or work out.” And if you don’t say it about yourself, someone else will. Wrong! As you state so cogently, when you are a wreck, you can’t be nearly as helpful to others. Of course, once again, it’s a “balance.” Sometimes you will make choices against yourself so that another might benefit. But if

you consistently choose others over self, you'll start to resent them (compassion fatigue) and then you'll start to fall apart (burn-out). Then you can't help anyone.

I so appreciate your awareness of your emotional health. Wearing my psychologist's hat, I know that is not good for people to pretend they have no emotions. Sometimes, exactly as you describe, it takes a terrible personal loss, like the death of your mother, to realize just how emotionally cognizant you have to be to survive life. It is tough, and you've chosen a profession that is very tough. But life is also joyous, and medicine is also awesome, and you need to be in an emotional place to appreciate this. Finally, I really liked your self-assessment. Remember that usually these are not flaws or weaknesses so much as potential vulnerabilities, things that if you don't pay attention to can lead to problems. What you said about saying no is something I can really relate to (and still struggle with!). But in addition to awareness, you have an excellent plan for how to improve your capacity to say no when it is needed. Indeed you do sound like you have a lot of insight into this whole issue. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi --, thanks for your self-care assignment. I love that you mentioned laughter – you are the first person to do so! Everyone talks about healthy diet, sleep, and exercise, which of course are extremely important; but I'm happy to see that someone realizes just being able to laugh is very healing. I also agree with you about the value of strong family ties – these do, in fact, contribute to helping us feel whole.

I relate to many of the potential problems you mention – saying no, liking to give but not get help. Regarding the latter, there are several interesting sociological models about help. When help is perceived as a one-way street (i.e., helpers and helpees), helpees can feel in a one-down passive inferior position. Here, it is certainly cooler to be a helper because they are together, competent, smart, capable, and have all the answers. But if helper-helpee is conceived of as a more fluid, mutual relationship, in which we can recognize that at some point everyone is a helper and everyone is a helpee, it somehow equalizes the equation. Finally, the medical sociologist Arthur Frank observed that without helpees, helpers would be seriously limited in their usefulness. So in fact, even in the helpee role, there is plenty of giving back. When I was in the hospital, completely incapacitated, not even able to get out of bed or go to the bathroom without help (which I hated), I reminded myself on a daily basis that I was giving helpers an opportunity to help me. And eventually they taught me to help myself, so it all worked out! Thanks for sharing, --. Dr. Shapiro

--, you make some really good points about seizing those small moments in life and wresting every possible drop of pleasure and relaxation out of them. Lunch without studying, commuting as a time to listen to your favorite CDs; watching the news or comedies, these are all great. I remember a resident who told me once she never failed to look at the trees and flowers on her 2 minute walk from the parking lot to the clinic.

These are the little things we dismiss as pointless, but they are all part of reclaiming the pieces of our lives that have value. Not everyone likes commute time (witness X), but like you I appreciate my 40-55 minute commute as a time to unwind, compose my thoughts, think through problems, anticipate what will be fun about the evening. I also liked what you said about the news reminding you both of your family and the larger world out there. Physicians can become very insular and this makes them rather narcissistic. Things that remind us to keep our personal and professional problems in perspective are always good.

Finally, you have a profound insight that external success will never bring inner peace. I have known some very famous scholars and researchers and all they could think about was how to get to the next level. There's nothing wrong with that; but it is worth asking what you really need to feel comfortable in your own skin. Thanks for a very thoughtful essay. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, you've said something beautiful when you write "Being a medical student... does not come close to the entire person I hope to be defined as." In my experience, there is a small percentage who are completely fulfilled by medicine. Usually these are researchers or world-famous surgeons; and they truly don't seem to need – or want – much outside of their career; indeed are not all that comfortable in other spheres of life. But for the large majority of doctors, medicine, despite its being a richly variegated profession, can't give adequate expression to all facets of a human being. Yet I believe that, rather than ignoring or suppressing these parts, the more fully you develop them (through surfing, connecting with family and friends, meditating), the more "whole" you will be in the practice of medicine, and the better doctor you will be. Most specialties require that the doctor be a lot of things, be able to draw on lots of different kinds of knowledge, and people who have brought to life different sides of themselves I believe are best able to do this. As for meditation, if this was a meaningful practice to you, it might be something you'd want to pick up again during residency. I don't know where you are hoping to go next year (Northern California for example has a much better developed network than Southern California), but even if you are still with yourself for 5 or 10 minutes a few times a week, you will be better connected with yourself, more centered; and this will help you deal with all the travails of residency. Best, Dr. Shapiro

--, you sound like you've done a lot of healthy introspection over the last four years; and understand yourself and your self-care needs very well; and most importantly, actually honor them! This takes commitment and discipline, but also brings real rewards. You seem to have a wonderful balance of physical activities, relationship connectedness, and friend and family support.

I've never met a medical student or physician who is not highly achievement-oriented and highly responsible as well. Otherwise, these people probably wouldn't end up being

doctors. So these are by no means detriments unless they are carried to extremes. I think what can happen is that the “balancing out” skills aren’t adequately developed – a lot of docs don’t know how to ask for help, delegate, or say no. Again, I think awareness is key. When you’re aware of warning signals, you can reflect on what’s going on and ask yourself in a non-punitive way, “What am I doing that contributes to this situation?” “What can I do to lessen my stress?” As with all things, practice makes perfect. Saying no, asking for help feels very awkward the first few times you try it (I am speaking from experience, since these are two skills I *still* haven’t developed fully). But if you are persistent, you’ll learn how to do them well (for example, at first I thought the only way to say no was with a lot of anger to back it up; or the only way to ask for help was from a place of complete desperation). You seem very well-prepared for next year. Dr. Shapiro P.S. Enjoy your trip to SouthEast Asia. Six weeks is a wonderful amount of time to have. And if you have not traveled in this area of the world, it will really change you. My husband and I spent a year in Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia almost 40 years ago, and the experience had a profound (and positive) influence on our lives.

Hi there, --. I was proud of you for bringing up the idea of therapy as a method of self-caring. I hope my comments did not detract or minimize what you were saying; I wanted to normalize the idea and also point out that one can enter into therapy for positive health as well as clinical issues. In any case, I thought it was brave and admirable. I personally am a believer in the idea of tune-ups; and periodically have returned to therapy after my own training during marital problems, family crises, and my own health challenges. So good for you.

You know, I learned an important lesson through yoga. At least in the practice I pursued, it is all about “exploring your edge” (what I imagine to be pushing oneself to one’s maximum capability *without injury*) and then returning to breath (just being, not doing). This has served me very well in yoga and in life.

I also think that in medicine it is very easy to become disconnected from one’s body. It’s a paradox, because you work with bodies all the time, but you often ignore your own bodies or set them aside. We are above all embodied creatures, we live life through our bodies, and we need physical activity as much as food or water or sleep. Btw, one of my daughters recently took up salsa dancing and she can’t say enough good things about it!

I hope it is not uncomfortable for me to pick up on this, but you were the only person in class who mentioned sexuality as a form of self-care. More intriguing still, you listed it under spirituality. I found this very perceptive. Sexual intimacy with a beloved other can indeed be a transcendent form of connection, not only with the other, but with the Oneness of all things. Good for you again!

Btw, I definitely agree with you that some days are better than others! Best, Dr. Shapiro