Thursday Memo – December 20, 2018

Happy holidays. Final TMM of 2018. Won't send anything out next week with many on vacation. I have written something this week as I have been thinking a lot about wellness as a member of two wellness committees and being on a bit of a personal wellness journey, (that luckily never ends). I think the tipping point is here - we either find a way to be comfortable in our own professional and personal skin and psyche or else. We see the "or else" all around us each day with rates of depression, suicide, anger, etc. increasing. So here are my thoughts on one small piece of a wellness solution puzzle.

You can respond with comment to me at hugh.silk@umassmed.edu or to the listserv directly.

Mindfulness or Else

You can't stop the waves but you can learn how to surf."

-Jon Kabat-Zinn

Recently at our department retreat we listened to the likes of Tina and Frank tell us about the importance of meditation. There are apps and courses; all it takes is will-power and time. It is not meditation alone of course that will help us to find a better way but rather incorporating the meditation into being more mindful. I find myself being overwhelmed by our current society, so I assume that while we in medicine are burning out and feeling overwhelmed, I think many people in our society are as well. Texts, tweets, facetime, snapchats, Facebook posts, faxes, mail, paperwork, electronic health record’s, tragedies and triumphs of family and friends and patients and colleagues, trying to exercise, trying to eat healthy, etc. etc. etc.

And so I personally have turned to more meditation. I did take a course - 6 nights with 9 other participants. I now meditate every morning when I arrive at work in my car for 1 to 3 minutes. I do some evenings as well with the help of an app. And there are so many ways to do this now from 10% Healthier to Headspace from Insight Timer to you name it. For me - it is the mediation before work starts that sets my day up for less chaos. As the temperature rises, I think back to those quiet moments in the car just focused on breathing and body scanning, and I calm
back down. If you have not read Attending by Ron Epstein - he describes this well when feeling angry with patients in chapter 3.

Part of the course was to learn many ways to meditate - walking, lying, sitting, speaking out loud about the sense most engaged, etc. Recently, on a weekend day I was doing a meditative walk. As I walked through the woods on a rainy day I was trying to think about what did I feel, smell, hear, taste, see and emote. Just before I started the walk I looked at my dog and noticed that this is what my dog does all the time. He was smelling the ground, looking around, stopping as he heard the sounds of the forest, tasting things that probably shouldn’t be tasted, etc. Life’s lessons being offered to me from my dog!

And so there I was: hearing the rain drops as they hit the leaves next to the path; hearing my feet as they crunched the leaves; feeling the rain on my nose and ears; seeing the branches of a dead tree across my route and having to step over them leading to feeling the uneven ground beneath my feet; smelling the smells of fall that remind me of long ago cross country running days; tasting the gum in my mouth; and as I headed up the hill, feeling my breathing increase and tasting the saliva in my mouth as it too increased while hearing my own breath and feeling my heart rate increase. A plethora of senses experienced and acknowledged without electronics, without discussion, without analysis - just experienced and noted.

The comings and goings of the week still entered my head, were noticed, but then let go so I could focus on the walk itself. But thinking about writing about meditating while walking got in the way. Is it truly meditative to be thinking about meditation? Or about writing about it? I sat down on a wet log and recited my thoughts into my phone (how hypocritical?) so I could let them go. Hence this blog. Then I gave myself a break - was it so wrong to be committed to sharing the joy of the experience that I had to chronicle it? We are so hard on ourselves, let it pass. And so I did, and so the walk was bliss.

At least half the walk was just paying attention to the senses and part of it was thinking about writing. Perhaps one step forward and two steps backwards or two steps forward and one step backwards. There were certainly a lot of steps in one direction!

Nevertheless it was a moment of just being in the woods, with the woods, with myself, with my dog, with the rain. And it makes me think of being in the office. I’ve been trying to embrace the concept of one deep breath before entering into the exam room just before my knuckles tap tap tap on the door. I can see my waiting room from each exam room door but I try not to look in that direction. It seems anti-social but I know if I look out there I will think about the next patient or a patient not seeing me today that is there to see a therapist and that will be a distraction. I have prepared for the patient behind the door with a review of my last note, their vaccines, labs, etc. I need to simply be there with them before, during, and just after the visit. When I’m in the room, I try to be more focused, to lean forward, to spend the first five minutes not even putting
up their chart up on the screen. If the best part of our job is being with patients, then I want to try to just be with patients.

There is a necessary evil of using the EHR, so I’m trying to find a way to enjoy that if that is possible? I’m writing shorter notes and marveling at what the EHR does offer me that my paper charts didn’t used to offer me. I attempt to focus on the positive when it is so easy for me to focus on the negative.

I'll end this reflection with a return to my mindful walk experience. My phone died in the midst of dictating this blog-like piece as I sat on that wet log. A message from the cosmos? Just enjoy the walk. Just enjoy the patient. Just enjoying the family. Stop thinking about writing about it. Stop thinking about thinking about it. Don’t just do,... just be.

And yet I did write about it. But I did do it, too. A step forward, back and sideways - I'm not a great dancer but I enjoy this dance in this phase of life. Good enough, no doubt.