

## Well-Being Corner

### The Narratives We Weave: A Family Physician's Inner Voice

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#### Personal Clinical Experience:

*It's 10:30, I'm in clinic, and I'm an hour behind. Ms. L came in for a quick titration of her blood pressure, but her son came with a laundry list of concerns, her cognition being a top priority as well as confusion over what the cardiologist discussed last week, taking over 30 minutes. Mr. M had issues like he does every time with transportation picking him up on time and delivering him to the right clinic. Mr. X has a new diagnosis of diabetes and is both overwhelmed and perplexed by that fact as well as our next steps of the plan pushing me further back in my schedule. My medical assistant grabs me before I enter the next room with a triage call. Ms. T sighs when I appreciate her patience while waiting her turn to see me with a resigned passive aggressive comment. I feel the chant in the back of my mind that I'm too slow, that I need to move faster, that I'm letting my patients down, that lunch is a dream, that I need to give Ms. T more time since she has been waiting so long to make up for it but that will just make me later. I feel panicky, my thoughts disjointed, my heart starting to beat faster, my charting slipping to the backburner (a problem to pile up and deal with later, after-hours), and honestly there is some anger building as Ms. T opens up with a laundry list of complaints that are unrelated to her chief complaint of right wrist pain.*

Ever feel the pressure building as your schedule tightens? Do you find yourself muttering under your breath about late patients or constant interruptions? We all have them – those internal narratives that play on repeat during a busy clinical day. But what if we took a step back and examined these stories, we tell ourselves? I know on days when I let that narrative color my patient encounters, I leave the clinic exhausted, disgruntled, and overwhelmed.

These narratives can be powerful. A constant stream of "I'm falling behind" or "this is never going to end" can fuel stress and negatively impact relationships with our

patients. However, by recognizing these narratives and reframing them, we can regain control and navigate challenges with greater resilience.

Here's the key: **become aware of your inner voice**. Notice the narratives that arise when a patient runs late, or an unexpected call disrupts your flow. Instead of getting swept away, acknowledge the thought and choose a more empowering response. Perhaps it's "This patient needs extra time, let's see how I can adjust" or "This call might be important, I can manage it efficiently." Perhaps reminding yourself that the time spent with Ms. L and her son prevented a dozen telephone encounters, medication errors, or even an ER visit and made them both less anxious about her care and strengthened our relationship.

**Check the tone** of that background commentary in addition to the story. Consider how you would speak to your medical assistant, clinical manager, patient, or friend and if you wouldn't use that color in your words to them. Then nix it when you speak to yourself. This is a way to practice self-compassion. Was it your fault Mr. M was late or that the lab called with a critical result interrupting your flow? Of course not. These events happen daily and though there are ways the system could be changed (decreased reliance on fee for service visits, less packed schedules, more care managers and social workers on staff, etc.) that will not help us with the sense of overwhelm today. By consciously reframing these narratives, we can shift our focus from the chaotic to the controllable. This empowers us to find solutions, maintain composure, and ultimately, deliver better care for our patients.

The solutions to the road bumps in our day are not always easy or instant. Scheduling more frequent visits may help manage those patients who come with their long laundry list of questions and concerns. For those patients that struggle to get their appointments on time, perhaps booking their appointments for a longer time slot with an optional televisit or same day appointment double booked at that time may compensate for tardiness or a missed appointment. Explore if televisits for those patients are more feasible with their home technology. Discuss boundaries with your medical assistant such that only truly critical interruptions happen while you are seeing patients.

*I did work through lunch but was able to take five minutes to catch my breath and reset my mentality. I forgave myself for my rude words to myself, reminded myself that I too have value as I used the restroom and grabbed some nourishment. As the afternoon progressed and the unfinished notes and administrative work piled up, I checked that*

*narrative: I can only do so much in one day. The work will get done when it gets done. There is more to who I am than what tasks I complete. My patients have chosen me because they trust me, they respect my opinion, and most of them will wait an hour when I'm behind because they value our relationship.*

By consciously reframing these narratives, we can shift our focus from the chaotic to the controllable. This empowers us to find solutions, maintain composure, and ultimately, deliver better care for our patients. Remember, you are the author of your internal story. Choose a narrative that empowers you, not one that holds you back.

Find more resources for Physician Wellbeing through the AAFP:

<https://www.aafp.org/family-physician/practice-and-career/managing-your-career/physician-well-being.html>

Please send us your experiences, tips, and questions for the next issue at [admin@VAFP.org](mailto:admin@VAFP.org). Is there a specific challenge you are facing as a physician preventing you from thriving that you'd like to see featured in this corner?