



The Power of Hope to Heal: My Call to Psychiatry as a Medical Student

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Received: 27 June 2023 / Accepted: 19 September 2023 / Published online: 29 September 2023

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“I hated my mother for it. I even bargained with her to change. Then suddenly, I became her.” I listened attentively as the speaker shared her story of alcohol addiction. I was attending a weeklong summer immersion program at an addiction center in Oregon. Along with a dozen other medical students from across the country, all interested to some degree in addiction medicine, I was here to listen, observe, and interact with patients, clinicians, and mental health care providers.

Today we were hearing from a former patient who was sharing her personal, lifelong relationship with alcohol—growing up with a mother who drank excessively, and the resentment she developed toward her mother. She also discussed how her own addiction to alcohol gradually took hold of her, catching her off guard. By the time she acknowledged it, she had lost her control.

As I absorbed her story, my thoughts drifted to my own childhood experiences. Memories of my mother’s ongoing battle with alcohol addiction and the bargaining sessions we would have flooded my thoughts. *Can you wait until after 6 PM to start drinking? Can you take the day off today, just for my birthday?* I grew up trying to minimize the consequences of my mother’s drinking. Despite my best efforts, I perpetually carried the weight of guilt and responsibility, a sentiment shared by many who find themselves in similar positions [1].

As emotions of guilt, shame, and grief surrounding my mother’s alcohol use have developed over time, I have also embarked on a journey of extending more compassion and empathy toward her. For example, I reflect on my mother’s challenging upbringing. Growing up, she had to navigate her mother’s battle with schizophrenia, a profound hardship that undoubtedly shaped her experiences with alcohol use. I have

occasionally convinced myself that alcohol was my mother’s coping mechanism for the lifelong struggles she has faced.

While I navigated my mother’s mental illness, I helped her to navigate my grandmother’s. During my grandmother’s acute crises, I accompanied my mother to various psychiatric facilities. My mother occasionally questioned the benefits of these hospital stays for my grandmother and grew tired of the process. Our family had been through this predicament countless times—several hospital stays, changes in psychiatrists, and trials of various antipsychotic medications. Despite our collective efforts, my grandmother would eventually experience destabilization and necessitate another visit. The arduous battles to secure effective psychiatric care took a toll on our family, making it hard to hold onto hope for her treatment outcomes.

However, it was within these settings that we periodically observed tangible improvements in my grandmother’s well-being following hospital stays and the implementation of new medication regimens. There were precious moments I saw her smile and laugh, witnessing a glimmer of light returning to her face, one that I could barely recognize. These moments served as powerful reminders of hope—that the challenges we faced in securing her care were unquestionably worthwhile.

As I observed the care my grandmother received for her illness, I questioned what options were available for my mother. I searched for local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) programs that I thought might be beneficial for her. I reminded her about the detrimental impact her drinking may be having on her health, attempting to persuade her that change was possible. However, I eventually realized that true conviction and the decision to pursue treatment, as well as the belief in its potential for a healthier future, had to arise from within her. It dawned on me that my role was to provide unwavering support and maintain patience, understanding that her journey toward recovery was a deeply personal one.

These personal experiences have significantly influenced my attraction in psychiatry as a career. Although I have desired to be a physician most of my life, it is only

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recently that I have recognized how much my family's experiences with mental illness have shaped my specific interest in psychiatry. These experiences have afforded me a firsthand perspective on the complexities of mental health disorders, teaching me the deep sense of empathy, patience, and resilience that is necessary to support those grappling with mental illness.

During my time at the addiction treatment center, I was exposed to a multitude of stories and encountered individuals from diverse backgrounds. Many of them had sought treatment at the center on multiple occasions. One individual candidly shared, "This is my 12th time." Initially, doubts lingered in my mind regarding the effectiveness of the process after so many attempts. However, I realized the need to challenge my preconceived biases and acknowledge that addiction recovery, much like recovery from many other conditions, often entails various setbacks [2]. It became evident that those setbacks are a natural and expected part of the healing and recovery process, and that this path is often non-linear.

So much of these patients' recovery and healing relied on a sentiment of hope. As one patient explained to me, hope was their last lifeline—a motivating factor to actively engage in their treatment and make plans for how to maintain their sobriety afterward. It became clear that the treatment center played a crucial role in cultivating this sense of hope. Through fostering a supportive and understanding environment, patients felt connected and empowered, laying the foundation for their journey toward healing.

To cultivate such an environment that fosters hope, I believe the most effective way is to leverage my personal experiences to enhance my ability to listen, empathize, and connect with my future patients. I aim to utilize the power of hope to instill determination and agency, even in the face of daunting and unpredictable treatment paths, such as those

witnessed in the cases of my mother and grandmother. I aspire to be a guiding force, empowering patients and their loved ones to discover their own inner strength throughout the healing process. Together, we will navigate the intricacies of mental health, forging a path toward more lasting well-being and fulfillment.

Declarations

The author of this manuscript affirms that all efforts have been taken to safeguard privacy and confidentiality. Whenever possible, identifiable health information has been obscured or omitted to ensure the privacy of individuals and prevent the disclosure of Protected Health Information (PHI).

The author's family members, whose personal circumstances are shared in this narrative, are fully informed about the purpose, potential audience, and depth of the information presented. Explicit verbal and written consent have been obtained, where applicable, to share their medical journey.

All clinical experiences recounted in this manuscript were conducted with the utmost regard for the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of the individuals involved.

Disclosures The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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