

A Lesson Learned the Hard Way: Caring for Patients Means Caring for Yourself

David Razo

The Saturday before Valentine's Day, I landed in the emergency room with chest pains. What a gift. On arrival, the veteran ER nurse took my blood pressure; it was 220/120. I was immediately taken to a bed and monitored by a small team of medical personnel as I underwent some routine tests. After several minutes, the young ER doctor (looking fresh out of medical school) came in and told me that my heart "was about to pop." I wasn't too worried, although maybe I should have been. I was really more concerned about my wife. I read her body language, which was rigid with her arms clasped unnaturally around her purse, and her facial expressions wrinkled with fear. I watched while she paced back and forth, touching me for comfort - both mine and hers. She was not responding well to the doctor's choice of words.

I was admitted to the hospital for additional testing. Those two nights confined to a hospital bed sparked many thoughts about what constitutes an insufficient healing environment, and how to maintain our health and well-being as health care professionals, as well as that of our patients.

My hospital room was clean, I think - it was hard to tell. Everything was aged and worn, and I wasn't sure if the stains on the walls were new or old. At least I had a window in my room. Periodically, I'd walk toward the window and allow the sunshine to warm my face while I took in a full view of the well-manicured cemetery below. There's nothing quite like watching a burial outside of your hospital room window to boost the body's natural healing responses! Yeah, right!

I wish medical professionals would put more time and energy into creating a proper healing environment. Surrounding patients with a nurturing environment invites healing, yet the medical profession continues to decorate medical offices in ways that do not foster optimal healing. Color influences emotional states and can support good health, but it can also facilitate poor health. Why are all hospitals painted that horrendous bluish-green? That color isn't warm and inviting; it's sterile and impersonal. The sight and smell of flowers can relax us, calm our minds, and stimulate a positive immune response, but you'd better hope you have friends and family members that can provide that luxury during your hospital stay, because the hospital certainly isn't going to! There is a medical doctor I have seen several times. During my visits, I have seen peanuts and used alcohol swabs scattered on the floor. What is he thinking? If more effort were put into creating a healing environment, the patient's immune response would be jump-started before treatment even begins. In short, environment directly affects health.

Most of us entered this profession to genuinely help people with their health concerns. Still, many of us have lost sight of the importance of maintaining our own health. We are good at giving advice and poor at following it. I was certainly one of those people - maintaining an extremely busy schedule, always pressed for time, allowing healthy eating habits to erode, and exercise...well, it was nonexistent. We push ourselves until our bodies begin to respond negatively, much like mine did. Our bodies need to be nourished. If we want to prosper financially with body, mind and spirit intact, we need to practice the very medicine we are preaching to others about. That TLC we

nourish our patients with also needs to be directed toward us. Get some good preventive medicine and nourish your soul. Routinely feed your body with massage and bodywork, acupuncture, whole foods and supplements. Take the time to quiet your mind and feel the wind brush past your face.

I went to the hospital because I stopped listening to my inner self. Thankfully, all of my tests came back normal and my high blood pressure - the official diagnosis - is now under control. But the experience served as a wake-up call. Since that time, I have made many lifestyle changes and have learned to take time out for the simpler things in life. These changes will help keep me healthy for years to come. Now I look forward to creating a healing environment for my patients that will support their health and well-being, as well. I hope you will, too.

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