

May More Voices: Coming Undone

Category: Coming Undone

written by Paul Gross | May 1, 2023

Dear *Pulse* readers,

In my work as a physician, I sometimes see patients whose bodies have come undone. It happens. But in truth, I spend far more time reassuring patients that their bodies have *not* come undone.

That lump is not a cancer.

Your headache is not a brain tumor.

Your chronic pain is not some obscure, horrible disease eating your insides alive.

At the same time, I work with patients to prevent their bodies from actually coming undone—for instance, by keeping their blood pressure and blood sugar under control. This is critical work, although its impact is invisible: No one gets to see the heart attack or amputated foot that never happened.

I do often see patients whose spirits have come undone. I recently saw a patient who was assaulted at his workplace. He was visibly trembling as he described the incident. “I can’t eat,” he said. “I can’t sleep.”

Another patient’s daughter is still involved with an abusive husband. My patient suffers with worry—for her and for their child.

How do I handle someone’s feelings of hopelessness and despair? I encourage a patient to seek counseling—to talk with someone. Alas, most patients do not choose this option. Maybe, from their point of view, they’re already talking with someone—with *me*.

So I listen. Ask a few questions. Offer a box of tissues. And try to avoid the temptation to give advice, that advice usually being something they’ve already thought of.

Often enough, by the next visit things have improved. Not resolved, but improved. The storm has passed, even if the seas are still choppy and the weather remains uncertain.

And I keep listening.

But what about when *I* come undone?

An example that comes to mind occurred after the birth of our second daughter. The birth itself went well, and our new baby was happy and good spirited, but the stress of a second little one in a busy household took its toll.

The combined demands of work and family left me feeling overwhelmed. Put upon. And my life partner, who was herself nursing our daughter and working outside the home, could barely keep up, let alone give me a boost, which left me feeling misunderstood and resentful. Not a recipe for a happy marriage.

Luckily, we had the good sense to follow the advice that I give my patients. We went to talk to someone, a psychologist.

It was the best thing we could have done. Counseling helped. A lot.

With time, the roiling pressure that had threatened to blow the roof off our house began to dissipate.

How did that happen? There were things that, in my stress, I had overlooked—things that we both needed to learn. We needed to recognize one another's unspoken needs and vulnerabilities. We needed to sit quietly and listen to one another, as I've learned to sit quietly and listen to my patients.

We needed to restore our faith in one another.

Our sessions achieved that. They pulled us back from the edge. The storm gradually calmed. The waves grew manageable. Once more, we found ourselves navigating the waters together.

What about you? This month's *More Voices* theme is [Coming Undone](#). Is there a time when you've come undone or watched someone else—a loved one, a patient—come undone?

Share your story with us using this *More Voices* Submission Form.

For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#). And have a look at last month's theme, [Unsung Heroes](#).

Remember, your health-related story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you!

With warm regards,

Paul Gross
Editor