

Personal Days

Category: Finding Balance

written by Karen E. Lasser | July 2, 2024

This week, our resident clinic was decimated. The interns were out on a “personal week”-the week between first and second year of residency. One of our senior residents was on maternity leave, and the three remaining residents were all taking a “personal day” here and there to attend a funeral, visit a sick grandmother, etc. My co-preceptor, realizing we would not need two preceptors this week, had taken a few days of vacation. Which left me with two new interns, eager and enthusiastic to learn, and my senior resident on her last day of clinic.

It was a perfect New England summer day, and I decided to take our skeleton crew out for tapas and a cold drink, to congratulate my graduating senior and welcome the two new interns. I shared with them some funny and sad memories from my intern year, and wishing not to burden them, kept a few to myself. Here are some of those memories:

1. I was so nervous that I would not have any time to go shopping during internship, that I visited Costco and made an enormous purchase including toilet paper and stationery supplies. I bought 25,000 staples, the minimum amount. To this day, I still have some of those staples!
2. One day, after a long shift, I went out for dinner and had a nagging sensation, almost a premonition, that something bad was going to happen. I arrived home to find my kitten, Vladimir, stuck in between the vertical bars of a wooden dining room chair. His hind legs were flaccid. I called the vet, who advised me to bring in the entire chair, and Vladimir, his spinal cord severed, was euthanized. I warned the interns at the table not to leave any pets alone during long shifts.
3. Not soon after my kitten died, we had an intern retreat in the countryside west of Boston, near a lake. One of the facilitators gave us large pieces of paper and magic markers and gave us a drawing assignment. I do not recall the prompt, but I remember drawing a picture of my kitten in the chair. My fellow interns’ drawings were just as grim. Sadly, one intern who was supposed to have joined our class in July had died in a car accident in Nepal, prior to starting internship. With dark humor, we joked, better to die before, rather than after, all the hard work of internship.

As I shared some of these stories and we devoured grilled octopus and batatas bravas, I realized, maybe it was my intern class (and others like it) that prompted our residency program to implement “wellness days.”

A few years ago, a former intern colleague died by suicide. We had worked many months side-by-side in the wards and on the units. I wonder, if when we trained back in the 1990s, if we had had personal days and had learned to take better care of ourselves, would she still be alive today?

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