

# Staying Over Our Skates

Category: Stories

written by Deborah Pierce | January 7, 2022



One winter weekend, I was walking in a local park that has an ice-skating rink. I stopped to watch the skaters for a few minutes. I'm not a skater myself, but I appreciated the skaters' wide range of ages and abilities.

Off to one side of the rink, I saw a young boy struggling to skate. He was hanging onto one of the walker frames that were provided, his face a mixture of determination, frustration and a hint of fear as he struggled to stay upright and move forward. Around him, many other skaters flowed by with ease.

The boy's expression, and struggles, immediately resonated with me as a

metaphor for my outpatient family practice.

Almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic (which has been superimposed over the ongoing pandemic of caregiver burnout), my patient visits are often a jarring mix: In close succession, patients who are suffering the aftereffects of COVID-19 infection in themselves or their loved ones are followed by patients who are either reluctant to get vaccinated or outright opposed to it.

I find shuttling back and forth between one patient's agony and another's apathy almost vertiginously exhausting. In addition, our city has suffered a dramatic increase in violence, which has magnified my patients' suffering yet further. The murder rate in our city is nearly triple the rate of prepandemic times, and there have been increases in intimate-partner violence as well. Compounding all of this are the pandemic-spawned economic and social disruptions: shortages in support staff, meaning extra work for those who remain; patients needing more paperwork and forms filled out to justify unplanned absences; patients needing more resources (counseling, financial assistance for meds and transportation) to cope in a changed world.

With the emergence of the Omicron variant, and with the issuing of new testing recommendations and treatment protocols several times daily, I've definitely felt like that boy on the ice—clinging to anything at hand so as not to fall on my face while trying to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of moving ahead. And though I suspect that my colleagues have been struggling as well, many of them seem to move through their clinical sessions with a grace that stands in stark contrast to my own experience.

After watching the boy struggle for a few minutes, I witnessed a beautiful moment. A slightly older child, more confident on his skates, approached him and said, "Here. Hold my hand, I'll help you."

With that small gesture, I saw something change for the struggling boy. With just a few minutes of guidance, he seemed suddenly to grasp how to move his skates in order to stay upright and move forward. As I continued to watch, he glided among the other skaters with increasing confidence and fluidity, at times even smiling. The older child skated off, working on his own skills.

Similarly, in my own work, I've been struck by what a huge impact a small gesture of help or kindness can have. A thoughtful holiday card from a patient, a staff member's proactively taking extra time to solve a patient's problem, a colleague's offer to help out with a challenging case—all of these help me to get back into my rhythm and to feel that moving forward is possible after all.

As all of us—patients, family members, medical professionals—do our best to navigate the rapidly changing landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant angst and despair, I believe that, at times, we must all feel like that struggling skater. Try as we will to convey confidence and calm, we must all have moments in which we feel utterly bereft of the skills needed to move forward even an inch.

At the same time, I'm convinced that we all have within us the ability to act as the more skilled older skater for another person. Kindness won't cure COVID-19, but it can at least help us to ease the way forward for ourselves and others.

Something as simple as a kind word, a bit of extra help or a listening ear can help each and every one of us to make our way around this overwhelming rink without falling.