



Finding a path to well-being



Being Superhuman

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The most profound thing I have learned from living and working as a physician in the time of a worldwide pandemic, is purely and simply that I am superhuman.

Note, I am not talking about having exceptional ability or powers, as in being “superhuman.” In fact, it is quite the opposite. COVID-19 has been a stark reminder of my human vulnerabilities. Just like all humans on this planet, I find myself susceptible to and fearful of illness and death, grief, the loss of friends and loved ones, and especially to loneliness. It’s humbling, and I have had many moments in the past year in which I’ve found myself feeling sad and defeated.

Thankfully, there is so much more to being human than suffering. In the last year, I have also been far more aware of and in touch with the finer human qualities of empathy, kindness, compassion and sensitivity, in both myself and others. There is

just something about shared hardship that brings out the best in people. For that I am grateful.

I look around and I am in awe of the exceptional human beings—especially doctors and other healthcare professionals—who have truly risen to the occasion, risking it all in the name of health and healing. They have boldly and selflessly faced a giant—a novel virus rapidly wreaking havoc—and without hesitation they have gone about the business of simply figuring it out. They have used every tool in their arsenal; from science to collective wisdom, to passion, to persistence, to instinct, to faith and just plain guts. The ways in which healthcare professionals have performed over the last year have been as close to superhuman as imaginable.

And yet, as we all know, being called on to deliver in this superhuman fashion can often take a toll. As we emerge into a

post-COVID world and start to cautiously breathe again, many may feel beat up and burned out. Others may find themselves weary of the pandemic and chomping at the bit to get back to doing what they were trained to do. Still others may be wary of going back to business as usual, as they now recognize their own very real vulnerabilities and the ways in which the social system they relied on let them down. And, of course, there are many grieving the loss of friends and loved ones, or perhaps dealing with personal health or financial concerns. For many of us right now, our well-being is tenuous, at best.

With COVID-19 nearly behind us (fingers crossed) and our well-being teetering precariously in front of us, we have a very important choice at hand. We have the opportunity to choose

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in this moment whether we fall back into old patterns—such as the superhuman practices of martyrdom, perfectionism, overwork and people pleasing—or whether we will choose a new path that honors, respects and even capitalizes on our humanness. It is my hope that we choose a more human approach going forward; that we look back on our experiences through fresh eyes, with the intention of learning and growing in healthier and more humane ways.

As a family practice physician and a life coach, I spend a lot of time trying to figure out the secrets to health and well-being. And, although I could give you a long list of evidence-based tips, tricks and strategies, I feel strongly that there are really just a few key areas that provide the greatest return on investment of time and energy. There are no real surprises here, other than perhaps the simplicity of these concepts.

First things first: make it a priority to meet your basic human needs

These needs include adequate sleep, regular exercise, a nutritious diet, physical and psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and a personal sense of value and knowing that you truly matter. These are called primary needs because you must meet them in order to survive and ultimately to thrive. As we learn from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, as long as our basic human needs are unmet, we will be, consciously or

subconsciously, distracted by the pursuit of these basic needs. As a result, the higher-level needs of joy, beauty, meaning and fulfillment are unlikely to be fully appreciated until our basic needs are satisfied and no longer a distraction.

This concept seems simple, and yet, for most of us in healthcare, to fully embrace it will require a true paradigm shift. No longer can we operate from the old paradigm of being superhuman and somehow not subject to these basic human needs; but rather, we must acknowledge and accept that these human needs are very real for all of us and that we simply must make them a priority. This is foundational if we truly want more joy and meaning in our lives.

Secondly, discover and capitalize on personal gifts, unique attributes and dreams

These are the things that make us special, light us up, and breathe life into our lives. You have spent your entire career learning how to deliver the “gold standard” of medical care. Now is your time to discover and reveal how your personal style, gifts and passions can be harnessed and lived out. This is about living a life in alignment with that which you love and care about, and there is plenty of evidence to support it. For example, Dr. Lotte Dyrbe from the Mayo Clinic reports from her research on burnout that if we spend at least 20% of our time doing what is meaningful to us, we will experience more joy and satisfaction in our lives. It’s simply time to find ways to do more of what really matters to you.

Lastly, but certainly not least, let’s take a stand for one another

As healthcare leaders you have an opportunity to support each other’s wellness, gifts and passions. Remind colleagues just how much they matter by encouraging them to get enough sleep, take breaks, use up their vacation time, or pursue a passion project. Your encouragement helps them to prioritize personal wellness and live a life full of what truly matters. Whether you provide support for a peer who is struggling, help to design more humane organizational policy, or advocate for more joy in the workplace, you shift the culture of healthcare toward well-being and meaningful work.

I hope you take the initiative to write your own personalized wellness prescription. With this, it is my hope that you will experience more joy, satisfaction and well-being, in ways that make you feel uniquely strong, special and more of the superhuman you are. 