

On Coaching and Self-Care

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Coaching has allowed me the space to practice self-care (a popular phrase but elusive concept). My conversations with my coach, Meredith Betz, allow me precious time to actively and audibly articulate my struggles and sentiments about the path of medical training. Her patient ears create the space to cathartically verbalize my inner monologue that the overwhelming amounts of school work, exams, and extracurricular projects drown out. For the first several sessions, I felt that this alone held the merit of coaching: a time to self-reflect with an active listener, a friend who reserved judgment and allowed me to come to my own conclusions about my experiences. I arrived at each session without a particular topic or theme prepared. Rather, I found it spill out of me during the first moments of our conversation, followed by my ideas on how to alter my actions in the future, with Meredith there offering her guiding insights and practical strategies. The act of scheduling an hour with her effectively protected time for a deeper form of self-care in which I myself was able to actively explore my thoughts in the judgment-free space of the coaching relationship.

Coaching has also helped me to practice self-discovery and realize the foundations upon which some of the tenets of my personality rest. During our third session or so, I asked to speak about my personal relationships, which had been under some strain since I threw myself into a rigorous board exam study schedule after returning from winter break. I found myself articulating personal traits that I had known about myself, but never verbalized to another person.

"I am not very good at asking for help," I found myself explaining, with stark realization how true that was.

Meredith probed me, "Why is that?"

Shifting in my seat, I mumbled that "I do not like to feel vulnerable, even with my friends and family."

I realized how nonsensical that confession sounded; I am extremely close with my family, and the majority of my friends have known me for longer than a decade. I had named the unstable foundation upon which this personal trait had grown, lurking in the dark. I felt my usual explanation of 'I am a very independent person' slip away as this inner fear was exposed. What I had previously viewed as a strength - my independence - was revealed to be, at its core, a self-indulgent, unsubstantiated flaw. Only through exposing this will I be able to shift this mindset, and hopefully re-find my independence with the *help* of my family and friends.

Perhaps most importantly, coaching has helped me practice self-development and given me the tools and time to understand how I can grow into the best version of myself. In our most recent session, Meredith stopped me mid-sentence.

“Do you realize how often you do that?” she asked me. “You always say, you *should* rather than you *will* or you *are* or you *can*.”

I stopped, confused. I had never considered the fact that I might be tough on myself or judge myself too harshly. I know when I work hard, I reward myself when I feel that I have earned it, and I try not to take myself too seriously. In signing up for coaching, despite all my interest in understanding my thought patterns in order to improve my professional abilities and relationships, it never occurred to me that my inner dialogues with myself may be the ones needing the most work. For the next twenty minutes, I found myself use the phrase “I should” twice more, while Meredith noted it another two.

“How long have you been using that phrase with yourself?” Meredith inquired.

I was unable to answer.

Why is it that I find myself so drawn to this verb rather than other, more action-oriented, options? Is it that I feel inadequate or incompetent, somehow? Is it that I fear I will lack the follow-through to complete said task – that *should* is somehow safer than *will*, less absolute? Is it that I feel I *should* do something in the same way that those around me are doing it? Is it that I feel I lack something (experience, expertise, quality, or trait) that my peers possess? I still do not have the answers to these questions. This is my journey of self-development – and it is my homework to find these answers.

In the interim since this last meeting, I have caught myself thinking about what I *should* do many times. Each time, I try to shift my thinking, replace verbs and alter my thoughts to reflect what I, in reality, *will* do and noting the difference. For every instance I note, however, I am sure there are many I do not. It is sometimes exhausting and always effortful. I know that this shift in mindset, in thought patterns, in internal dialogue will take time. That is both daunting and wonderful.

As a budding professional in a career that encourages, if not requires, lifelong learning, it is my hope that as I progress in my career I acquire more knowledge about not only medicine and my patients, but also myself. Navigating the rocky path of medical training, faced with the possibility of misstep at every turn, it is easy to become distracted by the overwhelming opportunities, the daunting requirements, and the remarkable resumes of our peers. I feel that coaching will endow me with the tools to become the most authentic doctor, professional, and self that I can be.