

The Importance of Coaching in Creating A Whole New Doctor

Compiled by Margaret Cary, M.D.

Following are five essays written by students at the Georgetown University School of Medicine who participated in a program called: “A Whole New Doctor.” These essays are important to include, especially for those interested in coaching physicians. Through these essays, those who wish to coach physicians can see the backstory and more fully appreciate the huge difference they can make.

Nilesh Seshadri, MD Candidate Georgetown University School of Medicine Class of 2019

As I navigated my third year of medical school, I felt relatively confident in my new role as a student on the hospital wards. I learned the tools of the trade necessary to succeed, including showing up early, anticipating your residents’ needs, and eagerly offering a helping hand. I figured out early how to be a productive member of the team and continued to trudge through this difficult year, knowing that I would soon have more responsibility as a resident. However, I realized over time that most of my energy was devoted to learning the science of medicine and helping with tasks throughout the hospital. During this pivotal year, I had hardly focused on self-reflection and my own personal growth.

When I started my relationship with my current coach, Carole Napolitano, in January, I realized how invaluable it would be to have an unbiased third party work with me to discuss my goals and accomplishments over the course of my third year. The coaching relationship is a special one in which students have the opportunity to struggle through their problems and weigh possible solutions, all of which occurs through a goal-oriented framework. While these meetings help provide a tangible measure of progress, the coaching session also offers a time for us to engage in reflection and self-discovery. There are few occasions during the third year of medical school that we get the opportunity to stop and think about our medical decisions, the fates of our patients, or our fears about our future careers. However, coaches can offer an outside perspective on these issues, which may help us to better process what occurs within the walls of the hospital.

I have only been working with Carole for a short time, but I am incredibly grateful as to how she has helped me navigate my concerns and fears about my professional goals. We have discussed the ways in which I can find balance in my life as I prepare for residency, and we have struggled through the much larger challenge of figuring out what I hope to achieve during my career in medicine. While I have always been thankful for my supportive family and friends, I am impressed with Carole’s ability to push me so that I can better understand my own feelings and aspirations. I am still new to coaching, but based on the experiences that I have had at this critical point in my professional career, I strongly believe that this

dynamic relationship will help me to gain new insights into my personal development as a soon-to-be physician.

Greg Stimac, MD Candidate Georgetown University School of Medicine Class of 2020

Coaching has been around since the beginning of modern thought, and many practices and theories that are applicable to fulfillment can be traced to early Greek and Roman etiology. The great stoics and peripatetics even had coaches. In fact, a tenant of Aristotelian philosophy is the concept of “eudemonia.” A eudemonic life arises from striving, pushing oneself to rational limits, and ultimately finding success. With it derives happiness from achievement rather than just entitlement. It comes with the satisfaction of being the best person you can be, and from that, the concept of virtue theory emerges, which claims that people will inevitably pursue good in life as they strive for excellence. Moreover, the aphorism “know thyself” has its origins in Greek culture. Socrates, the great Greek philosopher elaborates on the phrase by stating “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

I am reminded that the practices of the great thinkers before us have laid the foundation for my own virtues and moral theories. As such, I realized I was in a unique position because I had a coach in my midst who was willing to help me become a more confident individual, and in some ways, I am a reflection of these long-deceased individuals. I firmly believe the best way to “know thyself” is to be seen through the eyes of another who will give you an honest and objective perspective on your character.

My testimony to coaching's efficacy lies in a revelation I had about my personality: a way I came to know myself. A few years ago, I noticed I'd changed from a once outspoken and confident individual to a much more anxious, stoic introvert who lived mostly in his mind. While this isn't necessarily a negative attribute, I'd once been the theatre geek who was involved in every production in high school. Ironically, this anxiety juxtaposed itself in a fear for public speaking and musical performance, even among those I'd consider my closest friends. I knew this feeling was completely irrational, and possessing this quality clashed with my logical intellect. To me, this was a failure of character, and I considered this quality a large enough problem that I wanted to fix it. Coaching helped me focus my attitude and held me accountable for my own emotions. Although I only had a few sessions, my coach, Sharon Blackborow, employed cognitive and behavioral techniques to help lessen this fear with time. Beyond my primary goal for the coaching, it had the secondary effect of helping me become more in tune with my thoughts and emotions. I feel reinvigorated largely because of the effects coaching has had on me and have become happier because of it. I recognize the fulfillment I've sought in life finally coming to fruition simply because I asked for help.

Coaching opens a new avenue for novel thought about oneself and their profession. The beauty of Sharon's work lies in her ability to provide an objective evaluation of an individual with the goal of self-improvement - an outsider looking in. Everyone has something they can improve, and a coach can help you recognize what that quality is. However, it takes a person of understanding and patience to accept the criticism given by the coach. Medicine itself is a career of tenacious education that functions on constructive criticism. Those who choose not to accept this fact may very well risk dissatisfaction and unhappiness. That is not to say coaching is the sole means of self-improvement. However, coaching can aid individuals in realizing tangible goals or self-deprecating qualities that are not immediately relevant by mere self-reflection.

David Kurtyka, MD Candidate Georgetown University School of Medicine Class of 2021

What has coaching done for me? In the time spent with my coach, Julie Muroff, I have already made monumental changes in both my professional and my personal life. To be honest, I was skeptical of how a coach could actually help me bring about substantial change in my life, especially in such a short amount of time. I didn't fully understand how my coach differed from my personal mentor back home. After the first hour talking with Julie, I quickly realized the difference. A mentor can help guide you on your path by giving helpful insight based upon his or her own experiences. A coach will address an issue, meticulously determine the core or underlying cause and then support your creation of actionable tasks to overcome or change that issue.

As a medical student, I endure copious amounts of stress, a tremendous amount of material to absorb, and high expectations. However, for me and I assume most other medical students, this type of lifestyle does not afford much time for social interaction, especially non-medical school related social interaction. I believe students' dependence on their studies, nonetheless extremely important, dampens their social skills and ability to connect with others on a deeper level. In the long run, it very well may be that these social skills make the difference between life and death for future patients.

Julie perfectly exemplifies the way in which I want to interact with my patients; she is amiable, brilliant, consoling, meticulous, and honest. She has provided me with an insightful perspective on how to listen to others as well as ask key questions that allow others to open up. As future physicians, it is pertinent that we get to the root cause of our patient's current condition. Having a coach has really opened my eyes to a different type of meaningful communication, one that allows for genuine empathy, a deeper connection, and a prosperous relationship.

Cooper Ehlers, MD Candidate Georgetown University School of Medicine Class of 2021

Between lecture, the library, volunteering, and bed, days in medical school feel crowded. Once I start on the wards in a year, I will reflect on the relaxed days of my pre-clinical years. Afterwards as a resident, and later as a practicing physician, responsibilities will only continue to accumulate. I think of the mentor who told me that he had never tasted a sip of coffee during medical school, nor residency--and how that changed when his first child was born (*and I think about my reliance on a cup of caffeine to get up to baseline every morning*). Someday, I too will have to juggle my own health with my patients' and my family's. Every week in medical school, I am becoming convinced that preparing for clinical medicine is just as important as learning the skill of balance. I must start learning how to juggle personal and professional obligations now while they are "easy". The habits that I am developing will foster or hinder the balance that I strive to have as a man, father and physician. My coach, Atsuko Horiguchi, is my training wheels.

I was skeptical about coaching. I was not sure how much I could gain from it. Like most medical students, I share in the blessing and in the curse of being simultaneously introspective and self-actuating. The combination helped me to at least get this far. Separately, I assumed "coaching" meant that someone would be telling me what to do. Instead, my coach enables my autocriticism to pull forth organic solutions. She enables me to get out of my own way, to recognize answers to problems, and then, importantly, to act. Whenever we meet, Atsuko pushes me to generate new, realistic goals for myself and resolve to reach them. These small revolutions forward are just the start of my journey in coaching, but it is an ebbing ride towards balance that will undoubtedly be worth taking.

Elizabeth Dente, MD Candidate Georgetown University School of Medicine Class of 2021

Aspiring medical students will sit for an MCAT exam, write medical school application essays, and cultivate a radiant college transcript through hours spent in a library. We accomplish these things solo, and they take us one step closer to our medical school dreams. But who are we once we get there?

The beginning of medical school can be compared to starting a new job as a trainee – but instead of being rated on perhaps our sales projections, we are appraised by our ability to care for another human being. Like any new trainee, we may feel underqualified. There are times we may question whether we deserve to be here at all. When it is the middle of the night and we are still at the library or the hospital, what is it that convinces us to keep going? Who will I, Elizabeth Dente, the future physician be, and is she destined to care for patients in need? My coach, Shelly Gehshan, helped me find an answer to that question. My personal values, my future goals, and the way I look at the world are what drive me to become a

physician. Through Shelly's motivation and tough questions, I see my strengths that I can contribute to the medical field.

What resonates most with me from my coaching experience is the knowledge that I am not alone. Not only do other medical students feel and think like me, but so do others who are beginning stressful careers of their own. This is a part of the journey. My coaching experience has given me not only the confidence and conviction to complete the journey, but the ability to truly enjoy it.

Elizabeth Dente



As a first year medical student at Georgetown, Elizabeth's clinical interests are driven by her experience developing a patent-pending wound repair treatment as well as her research evaluating health care outcomes in Neonatal Intensive Care Units. Her experience with professional coaching has impacted her personal development, empathy, and communication skills, especially when faced with high stress situations in wound trauma or the Neonatal ICU.

Cooper Ehlers



Cooper Ehlers is a first year medical student and Class of 2021 President at Georgetown University School of Medicine. Originally from Los Angeles, Cooper took a year off after graduating from California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. During this time, he completed a road trip to volunteer in each of the 48 contiguous states. He is also enrolled in the medical school's Literature in Medicine Track, and is interested in pursuing Surgery.

David Kurtyka



David Kurtyka is a first year medical student at Georgetown University School of Medicine, with a deep passion for helping and caring for people after injuries. This has started to pave his way towards Orthopedic Surgery, with another potential interest in Dermatology, after assisting in many Mohs micrographic surgeries. Nevertheless, he will continue to keep his options open and could not be more excited to see where medicine will take him.

Nilesh Seshadri



Nilesh Seshadri is a third year medical student at Georgetown University School of Medicine. He is originally from Holland, Pennsylvania (a small town outside Philadelphia). He is interested in pursuing Pediatrics as a medical specialty, and is very excited to continue working in medical education in the next stages of his career.

Greg Stimac



Greg Stimac is a second year medical student at Georgetown University School of Medicine and has interests in surgery, clinical research, healthcare leadership, healthcare coaching, patient safety, and narrative medicine. He received first-class honors with his research master's degree in 2013 from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and has performed research in a broad range of disciplines including infectious disease, experimental anatomy, dermatology, plastic and reconstructive surgery, and patient safety since that time. He also spent time working in research and management for a burgeoning agriculture company in Washington State that developed innovative methods to address supply and quality issues for farmers in the fruit and tree nut industry.