

I Sit With It Longer

Cleveland Piggott, MD, MPH

AUTHOR AFFILIATION:

University of Colorado – Family Medicine, Denver, CO

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Cleveland Piggott, University of Colorado – Family Medicine, Denver, CO,
cleveland.piggott@ucdenver.edu

HOW TO CITE: Piggott C. I Sit With It Longer. *Fam Med.* 2026;58(0):1–2. doi: [10.22454/FamMed.2026.434815](https://doi.org/10.22454/FamMed.2026.434815)

FIRST PUBLISHED: September 10, 2026

© Society of Teachers of Family Medicine

“What’s that negative emotion you are sitting with for this coaching session?” The physician well-being coach asked me as I sat across from her in the middle of the room. As a clinician educator, I look forward to our periodic faculty development sessions from these expert coaches as they give us skills to use with our longitudinal cohort of students.

“I’m so tired.” As soon as I said those words out loud, I found myself holding back tears. I immediately regretted volunteering to do this as an example in front of a group of 20 of my peers. I need to hold it together.

“Often when people say ‘tired’, what they mean is emotionally exhausted, does that ring true for you?”

“Yes,” I go on to explain why but my voice begins to trail off as the tears start. I reflexively apologize. I’m not sure if I’m apologizing to the coach, my peers, or simply mad at myself for crying so publicly. Probably all three. Having a breakdown wasn’t on my checklist for the day. I take a moment to compose myself.

“I’m the vice chair for departmental engagement for family medicine, it used to be called vice chair for diversity, equity, and inclusion. It’s been harder to do my job for a while now for...a lot of reasons. Seeing what I built here with others being dismantled, seeing the pain in my colleagues and community has been hard, and I’m tired of having to take medicines to be able to do my job,” I take another deep breath, “Though I know I’m making a difference, it’s taking a lot out of me. It doesn’t help that I just came back from parental leave. I feel so tired, for a lot of reasons.”

“That sounds really hard...where do you feel it in your body and what does it feel like?” the coach asks.

“My chest...my stomach...it feels heavy.” I noticed a few of my peers crying in the group as they watch us. I keep breathing slowly. I remind myself that I try to show up as a vulnerable leader, and it’ll be okay.

The coach continues, “What do you think your body is trying to tell you?”

“I need to rest, but it’s not sleep, though that would help. I need to make a change at work.”

She makes an empathetic statement, and the questions go on for a few more minutes, though it felt much longer. I need to get out of this room.

When the session is over, I ask to be excused as if I’m back in elementary school and need permission to leave. I collect myself a bit more before returning. A colleague texts me a one-word message: *brave*. We didn’t need to say more. I try to avoid eye contact for a bit. I quickly realized what I was feeling was shame. Not for my vulnerability, but because I needed to stop doing something I’ve poured most of my academic medicine career into. My thoughts become loud, disorganized, and unkind. I’m not good enough. I’m not strong enough. I’m letting those I lead down!

My chest begins to tighten; my foot starts to tap. I want to move to a different feeling and push the thought deep down, but I make myself sit with it longer.

Remember what you just learned. What would you tell your students? Get curious. I give it a try and talk to myself in the third person. Maybe you failed but are you really a failure? If it is selfish, is that okay during this season of life? Maybe you are letting them down, and/or maybe they’ll be inspired by you doing what you need to do! You’re doing your best.

I take a deep breath. I feel my body relaxing. I thank the shame for helping me reflect, and we go our separate ways. Shame lets me know he'll be seeing me later; I have no doubt he'll keep his word.

I set a date to tell my supervisor and core team my decision to step down as vice chair and continue as a faculty member. Looking my team in the eye was the hardest part. I didn't want them to think I had abandoned them or the work, but I know I can't control their feelings. Some say kind words, others express general frustration, and a few keep their cards to their chest.

Over the following weeks, I process these thoughts and emotions, with family, friends, and mentors. It helps but briefly. The uncertainty of what was coming next, for the work and for me, added to the tension. One night, after my family are all in bed, quiet triggers my internal dialogue. It is unkind. Then I remember the phrase I often come back to, "what would you tell your students?" I'd tell them that I cared about them, that I'm sorry they're going through a tough time, and I'd ask them what their body is telling them.

I find a quiet space and close my eyes. I get curious. What is my body trying to tell me? I feel a pit in my stomach, shoulders are sagging, and tears come to my eyes. I sit with it longer. What I'm feeling is a little different this time. It's not shame or exhaustion... I'm sad.

I ask myself if it's okay to be sad. I feel my shoulders begin to relax. I take a deep breath. I reflect on what I'm sad about and what I'm going to miss. After doing that for a while, I become surprised as my perspective shifts. I begin to feel a small sense of pride—proud of what I've done over the years, thankful to those I did it with, and curious if this is the right decision. I feel committed to finding out.

I feel a warm wave from the tip of my head flowing down to my toes. A half smile emerges.

I sit with it longer.