

Resistance and Acceptance: Releasing the Need to Fix

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The nurse warned me this visit would be tough. I walk in feeling heavy with the challenge.

She's new to me, mid-40s, with chronic back pain among other complaints. I see a gulf of differences separating us from the start: background, gender, skin color, body habitus, lifestyle, health literacy, expectations. I hear her story, symptoms, frustration, and anxiety. I resonate with her distress.

A familiar tension creeps into me—chest constricted, perspective narrowed, as I focus on solutions:

How can I resolve her pain?

How can I prevent complications?

How can I protect her from death?

It feels like *she* needs to be different for *me* to be OK.

Resistance.

My heart tightens.

Then I remember.

I deliberately take a breath, feel my seat on the stool, my feet on the floor. Acknowledge the tension and anxiety I feel. I can feel this and be OK.

Everyone experiences pain. Everyone dies. *I can't change that.* I don't need to be free of pain and death to be OK, and neither does she. I don't need her pain to resolve for either of us to be OK. Her pain is hers, and not mine to fix.

Acceptance.

My heart opens.

I don't need her pain to resolve, but I see it.

The differences I perceive between us melt. Commonalities emerge.

I too have known pain. I see her efforts to get better.

I too have felt frustration. I see the barriers she faces.

I wish her well.

I don't need her pain to resolve, but I am no less invested in supporting her. I engage with the patient again, now relaxed, available, and eager to help.

Space for her to have unrestrained vulnerability emerges as I free her from obligations to meet my needs.

We explore her symptoms and treatment options together. Next steps become clear. We're a team, working together so she can move forward. Supporting her autonomy in decision-making feels obvious, automatic, and effortless.

She may get better. She may not. *I can't control that.*

At the next visit, I trust that I can meet her where she is and help her move forward from there.

What else will I ever be able to do?

I walk out feeling light and ready for the next patient.

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