

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

When You Forget to Pack the Yogurt

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TO THE EDITOR:

Dr Wayne Bryant's essay "Emergency Snack" tells the story of a family physician finding extra energy for a complex patient "one spoonful at a time."¹ On the surface, it's about a clinician eating an emergency cup of yogurt during an unexpected lunchtime visit. The deeper question, however, is what sustains us when we forget to pack the emergency snack. I suggest three additional sources of energy. These do not require refrigeration, never expire, and can always be replenished.

WORDS

From religious prayers to commencement addresses and locker room speeches, words can drive us forward.

Writing short notes to ourselves such as "I will help those in need" or "I will listen patiently" can provide encouragement when exhaustion sets in. Consider reviewing your medical school or residency personal statements for inspiration. Gratitude exercises (eg, daily lists, diaries, letters) can also improve symptoms of emotional exhaustion in health care workers.²

For the religious, you might memorize a brief prayer such as Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" or Maimonides' "Physician's Prayer."^{3,4} From the words of Martin Luther King Jr to William Osler, there are also plenty of secular quotes to draw from.

I encourage clinicians to consider combining these approaches by writing, then memorizing their own message.

IMAGES

Visual images can also serve as reminders of our "why" when we are feeling drained.

Photographs of family or friends can give strength. Images of your loved ones may provide the extra energy needed to care for someone else's. Pictures of meaningful places could offer similar nourishment.

Paintings can also encourage us to extend a healing hand, even when our own feels tired. Luke Fildes' *The Doctor* depicts a stalwart physician with an ailing child.⁵ Norman Rockwell's *Doctor and the Doll* captures the tenderness at the heart of medicine.⁶

Gather your loved ones (friends, family, even pets) and schedule a photo shoot. Their pictures on your phone, desk, or wall may provide the strength you need to help someone. Visit a museum and seek out art that moves you. Better yet, create your own.

MEMORABILIA

Lastly, tangible reminders of your mission can sustain you when the fridge is empty. Your medical diploma is a symbol of your dedication to helping others. Your first stethoscope or white coat can serve as mementos of how far you've come.

If you've received awards for patient care, teaching, or research, don't let them collect dust. Display them as evidence of the lives you've touched and the contributions you've made.

The best tokens can also be the ones your patients give you. Keep the holiday cards, children's drawings, and other treasures nearby for a burst of energy.

I enjoyed reading about Dr Bryant's emergency snack and how it sustained him through a patient's moment of need. Although we all need rest, Dr Bryant wisely notes that our health care systems do not yet allow us to "work without time constraints." Until then, we should pack extra words, images, and memorabilia. . . . And a cup of yogurt, too.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

I utilized ChatGPT to check for typos and grammatical mistakes in my original draft of this letter.

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